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# American disillusionment and the search for self-fulfillment in the 1970's: a cultural history of Taxi Driver, Annie Hall, and Saturday Night Fever

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AMERICAN DISILLUSIONMENT  
AND THE SEARCH FOR SELF-FULFILLMENT IN THE 1970'S:  
A CULTURAL HISTORY OF *TAXI DRIVER*, *ANNIE HALL*, AND *SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
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in

The Department of History

by  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1	
<i>TAXI DRIVER: A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE, URBAN DECAY, AND     VIGILANT SELF-FULFILLMENT.....</i>	9
CHAPTER 2	
<i>ANNIE HALL: A DECADE IN NEED OF THERAPY, MEANINGFUL     RELATIONSHIPS (OR SIFTING THE PIECES), AND CRITICIZING     THE CULTURE OF NARCISSISM.....</i>	36
CHAPTER 3	
<i>SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER: SURVIVAL IN AN AGE OF LIMITS, THE     NEW NARCISSIST, AND THE ADVENT OF BLOCKBUSTER CINEMA.....</i>	70
CONCLUSION.....	107
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	117
VITA.....	124

## ABSTRACT

Three popular and critically acclaimed films of the post-Watergate era illustrated and criticized the period's disillusionment. Likewise, a series of political and economic crises spawned a shift in American culture. The Sixties' mass social movements dissolved into the Seventies and launched a trend in which Americans became preoccupied with themselves more than the state of the nation. Controlling one's own destiny became a collective obsession when confronted with the period's various political and economic ailments. The "Me" decade turned inward rather than concern itself with public issues. Therefore, American culture earned dubious labels such as narcissistic and decadent from critics and scholars. *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), written by Christopher Lasch, became one famous cultural attack of the 1970s. Lasch's commentary serves as an instrumental source to place the era's films in their historical context. Several other notable sources described ways that searching for self-fulfillment saturated American society.

Popular culture's contributions in the cinema mirrored the period's social trends. *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Annie Hall* (1977) represented the peak to one of two major waves of a Seventies' film Renaissance, in which personal narratives appealed to a maturing audience of baby boomers. Films with anti-establishment themes, more intellectual in nature, and cost-effective budgets helped to revive the financial burden of major studios. Ironically, the success of such films spawned the second wave of cinema, in which "blockbusters" ultimately proved a more attractive formula for producers by the end of the decade. *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), a hybrid of both waves of cinema, presents an interesting case study. The film's commercial impact influenced the future direction of the industry. Although produced on a restrictive

budget and containing cultural criticisms similar to the other two films, its emphasis on commercial considerations to the youth market paved the way for other blockbusters similar to it and a resurgence of optimistic narratives by the beginning of the 1980s. Nevertheless, each analysis describes the period's disillusionment and search for self-fulfillment projected to audiences in the 1970s.

## INTRODUCTION

America experienced a tumultuous period of crises in the decade known for the Watergate Scandal, the formation of OPEC, and the end to the war in Vietnam. Jimmy Carter's famous "malaise" speech on July 15, 1979 summarized the nation's sentiments. He said the country experienced, "a crisis of confidence," that was more dangerous than the threat from energy or inflation.<sup>1</sup> Scarcity was on every American's mind. The postwar affluence of the Fifties and Sixties found itself replaced by fears of running out of natural resources, cold houses, and lines at gas stations. Prices of groceries rose 60 percent in five years and oil prices increased fivefold.<sup>2</sup> Unemployment skyrocketed to more than 9 percent.<sup>3</sup> Scholars have noted that social changes in the late Sixties and early Seventies created an apocalyptic mood of uncertainty in American culture. The period's economic limitations spread into the arts and provided a breeding ground for experimentation, in which films increasingly presented various social statements. Consequently, narratives about disenchantment with characters reflecting quests of personal fulfillment became the focus of many popular films.

Coinciding with the late Sixties' atmosphere of radical social upheaval, the film industry experienced a revolution of its own. Gary Kurtz, producer of *Star Wars* (1977), believes that changes in college students' intellectual attitudes during the Sixties affected a generation of

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<sup>1</sup>Jimmy Carter, "Energy and National Goals: Address to the Nation, July 15, 1979," *Public Papers of the Presidents: Jimmy Carter* (1980), bk.2, 1235-1241, quoted in Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 141.

<sup>2</sup>Richard J. Barnett, *The Lean Years* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 16.

<sup>3</sup>"Unemployment Rate," *Wall Street Journal*, 9 February 1976, 1.

artists. Students who wanted to write the great American novel became interested in wanting to make the great American movie.<sup>4</sup> The studio system struggled to compete with television and was out of touch with its audiences. The unexpected success of *Easy Rider* (1969) convinced studios to take risks on projects with new styles and subjects. The film school generation included young talent like Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and Martin Scorsese. A new decade of films emerged under the influence of a dawning cultural malaise.

As disenchantment spread throughout the nation during the early Seventies, Americans sought an escape from the impending crises caused by politics and economics. Television steadily became more popular and convenient than going to the movies in the postwar period. However, audiences' interests changed over time. By the final years of Vietnam, the appeal of Congressional hearings that identified communists and the nightly reports of the body count in Southeast Asia became overshadowed by major sporting events. The Superbowl attracted seventy-five million viewers during the signing of Nixon's peace agreement in 1973.<sup>5</sup> Popular programs began to reflect the country's responses to social changes. "All in the Family," which aired from 1971-79, expressed nostalgia about a declining American culture. Archie, the conservative bigot, clashes with his son-in-law, Michael. Played by Rob Reiner, Michael epitomizes liberal positions on all subjects and represents America's youth. The show's theme song, "Those Were the Days," signifies that although young people represent more appealing

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<sup>4</sup>"The Film School Generation," *American Cinema*, DVD, directed by Steve Jenkins (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment, 1995).

<sup>5</sup>Tad Szulc, *Innocents at Home: America in the 1970s* (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 8.



positions than Archie, they do not possess the wisdom of their parent's generation.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, as television continued to cater subtly to the silent majority, the time was ripe for a revolution to occur in film that appealed to younger audiences.

By the end of 1967, Hollywood studios faced financial instability. The failure of many big-budgeted productions, the abandonment of the Hays Code, and the death of major Hollywood moguls such as Louis B. Mayer marked a crossroads in the history of American cinema. Studios continued to finance expensive films in the late Sixties and early Seventies but a single flop had the potential of ruining the company. Therefore, studios relied on proven formulas for success before funding projects. The use of big name stars and adaptations of popular narratives from bestsellers and musicals resulted in *The Godfather* (1972), *The Exorcist* (1973), and *The Sound of Music* (1965).<sup>7</sup> Hollywood's struggle to compete with television and its search for new ways to insure their products' success resulted in the origins of today's independent cinema.

As America's counterculture criticized the established authority, new films challenged the conventional modes of Hollywood. A group of talented filmmakers transformed a fledgling industry by creating artistic expressions on film. Robert Sklar traces the decline of the studio system through the Fifties and Sixties in *Movie-Made America*. He argues that a new breed of filmmaker found more success "at making motion-picture art than motion-picture money."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Peter Clecak, *America's Quest for the Ideal Self: Dissent and Fulfillment in the 60s and 70s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 95.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 289.

<sup>8</sup>Sklar, 290.

Making personal films became the predominant trend among the film school generation. A fusion of influences inspired them during the period.

Tempted to pay homage to American auteurs like Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, and John Ford, new waves in film from Europe liberated filmmakers from the classical way to create narratives. Many famous directors credit French, Italian, and Japanese films. Artists like Jean-Luc Godard, Federico Fellini, and Akira Kurosawa introduced new points of view and emphasized substance as well as form. Hollywood embraced the new style because their low budgets, attributable to guerilla tactics, relieved the pressure to hit single, box-office homeruns. Thus, narratives became extensions of filmmaker's desire to convey their visions of truth to the viewer.

Younger audiences, especially, identified with new films because their subjects delved into issues related to a changing society. Films began to tackle difficult topics on sexual taboos, the war, and distrusting the government. *The Graduate* (1967), *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), and *The Conversation* (1974) each criticized the country and reflected sentiments from the women's and antiwar movements. The late Sixties was a politically charged era, therefore, films became overtly politicized. Axiomatically, as the early Seventies became riddled with crises, filmmakers, troubled by the period's uncertainty, imprinted themes and images from personal experiences into their medium of expression. In addition, trends of the "Me" decade displaced social problems as national priorities and became apparent in the cinema of the 1970s.

Three popular and critically acclaimed films of the post-Watergate era illustrated and criticized the period's disillusionment. Likewise, a series of political and economic crises spawned a shift in American culture. The Sixties' mass social movements dissolved into the

Seventies and launched a trend in which Americans became preoccupied with themselves more than the state of the nation. Controlling one's own destiny became a collective obsession when confronted with the period's various political and economic ailments. The "Me" decade turned inward rather than concern itself with public issues. Therefore, American culture earned dubious labels such as narcissistic and decadent from critics and scholars. *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), written by Christopher Lasch, became one famous cultural attack of the 1970s. Lasch's commentary serves as an instrumental source to place the era's films in their historical context. Several other notable sources described ways that searching for self-fulfillment saturated American society.

Popular culture's contributions in the cinema mirrored the period's social trends. *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Annie Hall* (1977) represented the peak to one of two major waves of a Seventies' film Renaissance, in which personal narratives appealed to a maturing audience of baby boomers. Films with anti-establishment themes, more intellectual in nature, and cost-effective budgets helped to revive the financial burden of major studios. Ironically, the success of such films spawned the second wave of cinema, in which "blockbusters" ultimately proved a more attractive formula for producers by the end of the decade. *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), a hybrid of both waves of cinema, presents an interesting case study. The film's commercial impact influenced the future direction of the industry. Although produced on a restrictive budget and containing cultural criticisms similar to the other two films, its emphasis on commercial considerations to the youth market paved the way for other blockbusters similar to it and a resurgence of optimistic narratives by the beginning of the 1980s. Nevertheless, each analysis describes the period's disillusionment and search for self-fulfillment projected to

audiences in the 1970s.

*Rocky* (1976) won the Oscar for Best Picture and gave millions of Americans a reason to cheer again in the year of the Bicentennial Celebration. Attempts to inspire hope and recovery permeated the country. However, another film of the same year, nominated for Best Picture, reminded audiences about the country's problems and gave them numerous reasons to worry about American society. *Taxi Driver*, directed by Martin Scorsese, cast Robert DeNiro as a Vietnam veteran named Travis Bickle, who gets a job driving a cab in New York City. Disgusted by urban squalor, Travis takes matters into his own hands. Written by Paul Schrader, the film continues a tradition of American social commentary. *Taxi Driver* presented audiences with a veteran's perspective of America after returning home from Vietnam. The film is brutally violent and contains subject matter that depicts drugs, prostitution, and urban decay. Despite efforts to restore order and confidence in 1976, *Taxi Driver's* content gave Americans reasons to feel anxious and focus on themselves.

A psychiatrist named Dee Burton said, "Woody Allen is anxious about things that a lot of people are thinking about." Likewise, *Vanity Fair* wrote of the tendency to treat "Allen and his work as a sort of cultural barometer."<sup>9</sup> Woody Allen changed the course of his comic style and career when he wrote, directed, and starred in *Annie Hall*. His characters embody the period's hallmarks of short-term relationships and long-term therapy. Allen plays a New Yorker named Alvy Singer. *Annie Hall's* narrative follows Alvy as he subjectively sifts through the pieces of his turbulent relationship with his girlfriend played by Diane Keaton. The film's therapeutic

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<sup>9</sup>Douglas Brode, *Woody Allen: His Films and Career* (Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1985), 21.

essence reflected the increasing popularity of American culture's self-help trends, the disintegration of traditional relationships, and criticisms of the decade's narcissism.

John Travolta's performance, wearing a white suit and pointing his finger towards the sky, made him a popular icon of American culture in the late 1970s. Travolta appeared as Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever* and filled the cinema's vacancy left by Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly. Tony typified the American struggle to survive the period's pervasive sense of hardship. The film's soundtrack complemented Tony's energetic spirit as he danced his way out of a humdrum existence from blue-collar life in Brooklyn. Finally, *Saturday Night Fever's* popularization of disco's hedonistic nightlife and subculture illustrated a character's journey to find self-fulfillment in a decade of disillusionment.

Attention to the films' form alone is insufficient for a historical argument. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. admitted that films are ambiguous and difficult to extract meaning from but that it should not dissuade historians. He suggested using films in the way that social and intellectual historians draw from literature and paintings.<sup>10</sup> Like any other document, the effective use of films as primary sources requires their adequate grounding in the period's history. Various secondary sources offered relevant material on American society's events and cultural shifts. Research covered various references on the 1970s, works that represent an array of perspectives from the period's scholars, and film history. Delving into film reviews, the filmmakers' backgrounds, and their narratives' intentions also provided invaluable ideas about the period's disillusionment and collective narcissism. Overall, interpreting films with historical evidence

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<sup>10</sup>John E. O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson, eds., *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980), ix.

increases our understanding of a decade riddled by crisis.

*New West* magazine wrote, “It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times,” to describe the Seventies and added that America welcomed its end “not a moment too soon.”<sup>11</sup> Journalists and scholars seemed determined to forget about the 1970s. However, various political and economic conditions that plagued America throughout the 1970s explain the cultural changes that affected postwar liberal traditions and culminated with the rise of new conservatives. Defining these changes provide the connections between the period’s history and changes in the film industry. My selection of *Taxi Driver*, *Annie Hall*, and *Saturday Night Fever* as primary documents came not only from their expressions of similar cultural trends but also because all of the films shared New York City as their setting. Urban America experienced devastating deterioration from an array of unrest created by the abandonment of postwar liberal programs and economic limitations throughout the 1970s. Each film presented urban perspectives of the period’s cultural reactions to such changes. The films differed in their genres, which varied between a gritty thriller, a comedy, and an updated musical format, but they all still captured prominent features of the “Me” decade. Although the decade was plagued by moments that tarnished our national pride, it contributed celluloid documents that illustrated cultural reactions to social changes and valuable lessons of history.

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<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Peter Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982), ix.

## CHAPTER 1

### *TAXI DRIVER: A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE, URBAN DECAY, AND VIGILANT SELF-FULFILLMENT*

A taxicab cruises through a thick cloud of steam coming from the city's street in the first shot of *Taxi Driver*. Reviews in *Newsweek*, the *New Republic*, and the *New York Times* all noted the relevance of the film's opening metaphor. "Right away you know where you are. Dante had a word for it," wrote *Newsweek's* Jack Kroll.<sup>12</sup> The film undoubtedly mirrored the concerns and social paranoia of the 1970s. *Taxi Driver* illustrates an era in which extinguished national hopes, urban decay, and a legacy of public dissent precipitated new cultural trends. Travis Bickle's disillusionment, isolation, and psychotic behavior reflect extreme examples of the decade's anxiety and preoccupation with self. The film's unsettling images of New York, placed in its historical context, fuel Travis' narcissistic reflections and typify American culture during the "Me" Decade. Although spawned as a personal film, *Taxi Driver* is a document rich with social commentary and emblematic of a nation needing to let off some steam.

*Taxi Driver's* creators rooted the film's message from their own life experiences. Consequently, the film's protagonist voiced their feelings about some of the difficulties that the nation faced and mirrored their social concerns. Paul Schrader, the film's writer, decided to use a taxi as a metaphor for the loneliness that he felt from his divorce in 1973.<sup>13</sup> Martin Scorsese, who wanted to become a Catholic priest in his youth, directed the film's violence ritualistically,

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<sup>12</sup>Jack Kroll, "Hackie In Hell," *Newsweek*, 1 March 1976, 82.

<sup>13</sup>Mary P. Kelly, *Scorsese: A Journey* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 89.

to appear as a religious experience.<sup>14</sup> He intended the film to look like a portrait of an urban Gothic horror, mirroring fears of the city's rise in violence.<sup>15</sup> Robert DeNiro, who had won an Oscar for *Godfather Part II* in 1974, researched the role of Travis by driving a cab in New York City before shooting began. Columbia Pictures produced the film on a shoestring, 1.3 million-dollar, budget, in 1975.<sup>16</sup>

When Paul Schrader's wife, Jeannine Oppelwall, left him, he turned to drinking, wandered the streets of New York City at night, and frequented adult movie theaters.<sup>17</sup> His personal crisis reached its height when he was treated at a hospital for a stomach ulcer. To alleviate his emotional pain, Schrader recovered by incorporating his experiences with alienation and drifting in an urban environment into a script about a New York cabby named Travis. In an interview with *Film Comment*, Schrader advised young screenwriters, "to reach deep into yourself, pull out something unique and meaningful to you, and see it in the context of commercial film."<sup>18</sup> Before writing *Taxi Driver*, Schrader had attended the American Film Institute and was working as a film critic. He had met the director of *Mean Streets* (1973) at a party and thought his script was right for the young New Yorker named Martin Scorsese.

Scorsese says that *Taxi Driver* is based on his impressions from growing up in New York

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<sup>14</sup>Richard Goldstein, and Mark Jacobson, "Martin Scorsese Tells All: 'Blood and Guts Turn Me On!'" *Village Voice*, 9 April 1976, 30.

<sup>15</sup>*Taxi Driver*, DVD, prod. Michael and Julia Philips, dir. Martin Scorsese, 1 hr. 54 min. (1976; Culver City, CA: Columbia TriStar Home Video, 1999).

<sup>16</sup>Les Keyser, *Martin Scorsese* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 67.

<sup>17</sup>Keyser, 66.

<sup>18</sup>Charles Michener, "Taxi Driver," *Film Comment*, March-April, 1976, 16.



City. He wanted to make a film that was a cross between a Gothic horror and a story from the New York *Daily News*.<sup>19</sup> *Mean Streets*, his break-out film as a director, focused on the lifestyles of inner city hoodlums and introduced audiences to Robert DeNiro. Scorsese's next film became *Alive Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), which earned Ellen Burstyn an Oscar and inspired the television sitcom "Alice." The film presented a feminist account of a single mother's struggle for self-fulfillment.<sup>20</sup> Thus, *Taxi Driver* gave Scorsese an opportunity to revisit themes from each of his previous films because it presented a character's search for meaning in an environment of urban decay. Scorsese's religious background as a Roman Catholic also affected his direction of *Taxi Driver*. He says of the film, "I relate to it personally on an emotional level. It's about a guy whose feelings are repressed and what happens in extreme cases of repression and isolation."<sup>21</sup> As for DeNiro, *Newsweek* described his performance, in which he "created a total behavioral system for his underground man," as the embodiment of "the desire of people today to create authentic selves."<sup>22</sup> DeNiro's exhaustive efforts before filming enabled him to become Travis Bickle.

Violence surrounded the making of the film. A murder occurred around the corner from where a scene was shot. Scorsese did not know which cops were for the film's security and which were for the murder around the corner. In fact, the filming took place during the city's

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<sup>19</sup>David Thompson, and Ian Christie, eds., *Scorsese on Scorsese* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), 54.

<sup>20</sup>Cook, 145.

<sup>21</sup>Gary Arnold, "Scorsese: Igniting the Slow Fuse of Repression," *Washington Post*, 10 February 1976, B7.

<sup>22</sup>Kroll, 83.

fiscal crisis that left it almost bankrupt. Michael Harrington describes the impact of the city's recession and unemployment in *Decade of Decision*. He argues that failures to maintain liberal policies led to urban crises in New York and other American cities. In 1977, NBC News reported the existence of gangs of teenagers willing to commit murder for a small price. Harrington states that urban violence increasingly spilled over into middle class areas, which plagued subways and parks with mugging and vandalism.<sup>23</sup> The aura of a city out of control shows up in *Taxi Driver*. Scorsese, a resident booster, admits "That summer was a down point for New York, and it shows...in the mood of it. It was so hot you could see the violence shimmering in the air, taste it in your mouth, and there we were in the middle of it."<sup>24</sup> Although filtered through a character's psychotic mind, *Taxi Driver* presented audiences with a disturbing portrait of a city's underlying social condition.

New Yorkers comprised some of the first audiences to see *Taxi Driver* when it opened Sunday, February 8, 1976. Scorsese remembers great anticipation and excitement. He says that lines stretched outside a theater's box office at noon waiting for the two o'clock show and people cheered during the opening titles.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, *Taxi Driver* is not the kind of film that unified audiences like other films of the period, such as *Rocky* (1976) and *Star Wars* (1977). Gary Arnold reviewed the film for the *Washington Post* and wrote that its "the sort of movie you

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<sup>23</sup>Michael Harrington, *Decade of Decision: The Crisis of the American System* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 183.

<sup>24</sup>Keyser, 68.

<sup>25</sup>*Taxi Driver*, DVD.

go out for a good stiff drink on, or walk the streets brooding about.”<sup>26</sup> *Taxi Driver*, a product of an unstable time, allowed audiences to identify with the main character’s troubling thoughts and actions.

The “stormy, uncertain Seventies” marked a declension from the optimism of the early Sixties.<sup>27</sup> The era’s idealism, fueled by policies of postwar liberalism, ended when the realities of Vietnam led to a spiral of inflation in subsequent years. Foreign policy diverted attention from domestic concerns. Daniel Bell argues that the failure of liberalism to acknowledge limitations and to make sacrifices led the nation to its economic problems during the 1970s.<sup>28</sup> Thus, enhancing prosperity and equality to all Americans, the goal of Johnson’s Great Society, took a hiatus. Nixon’s election signaled a political shift that rivaled the agendas of radicals and liberals. His presidential paranoia and the actions of CREEP (Committee to Re-elect the President) were exposed during the Watergate Scandal. The Pentagon Papers gave further reason to question the government’s integrity. Ultimately, *Taxi Driver* conveys the feelings of rage, frustration, and fear that Americans experienced consistently throughout the Seventies. The film’s timeless quality is attributable to the story and character that touch these basic human emotions. The narrative’s perspective engages the film’s viewers because Travis’ actions stem from identifiable human impulses like disgust and anger. Although he displays psychotic behavior, taking viewers deeper into his madness, one cannot help but relate to and empathize

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<sup>26</sup>Gary Arnold, “Scorsese: Igniting the Slow Fuse of Repression,” *Washington Post*, 10 February 1976, B1.

<sup>27</sup>Schulman, 4.

<sup>28</sup>Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976), 25-26.

with Travis due to his humanity and realism brought to the character by DeNiro, Scorsese, and Schrader.

The story begins when Travis Bickle, played by DeNiro, gets a job driving a cab because he cannot sleep at night. Walking into the personnel office, he wears an Army jacket with a patch reading “King Kong Company, 1968-70.” Travis applies for the position eleven months after his honorable discharge from active duty in Vietnam. Schrader wrote in the screenplay, “As the earth moves toward the sun, Travis Bickle moves toward violence.”<sup>29</sup> Scorsese constructed Travis’ psychological profile based on a former Green Beret.

Travis represents a veteran who had trouble readjusting to life after coming home from the war. Accounts from veterans who experienced difficulty in their readjustment testify to Travis’ personality. One veteran says, “Coming back to America is not coming back at all, it is starting again. I wasn’t ready to start again, I had to get used to it...I was pretty lost for a couple of months.”<sup>30</sup> Dave Christian, a highly decorated Vietnam veteran, summarizes the public’s reception of veterans’ homecomings. He remembers people telling veterans that what they did was worthless, which “twisted a lot of guys.” Another veteran describes his experience by saying, “At my age I should be worrying about getting dressed up fancy, making some bread, and learning to disco...Instead, I’m worrying about not having any emotions.”<sup>31</sup> Although *Taxi Driver* does not make such explicit political comments about Vietnam, its main character’s

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<sup>29</sup>Paul Schrader, *Collected Screenplays 1* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2002), 5.

<sup>30</sup>Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), 97.

<sup>31</sup>Carroll, 314.

perspective embodies the sentiments of these veterans after coming home. The film's narrative follows Travis' view from his windshield as he drives his cab and focuses on images of urban squalor.

The Seventies witnessed a political shift to the right that allowed urban decay to increase. Disenchantment with American institutions discouraged voters like Travis. The 1976 Gallup Opinion Index Report showed the national concern for political corruption at its highest point following Watergate.<sup>32</sup> Blue Collar workers comprised only 26 percent of all voters by 1980.<sup>33</sup> Power increased to elite blocs of voters and devastated interest in public works, civil rights, and poverty.<sup>34</sup> New York City spent billions of dollars on spectacular office buildings but housing deficits in 1973 affected three-million people.<sup>35</sup> Between 1960 and 1980, the chance of being robbed, raped, assaulted, or murdered tripled.<sup>36</sup> Politically apathetic, the city's blight becomes the motivation for Travis' subsequent vigilance.

During his initial interview, Travis tells the personnel officer that he would drive "anywhere, anytime," even through the South Bronx and Harlem at night.<sup>37</sup> Despite the

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<sup>32</sup>Armand L. Maus, and Julie C. Wolfe, eds., "Malice in Blunderland," in *This Land of Promises: The Rise and Fall of Social Problems in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 342.

<sup>33</sup>Thomas B. Edsall, *The New Politics of Inequality* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 182.

<sup>34</sup>Edsall, 35.

<sup>35</sup>Szulc, 224.

<sup>36</sup>David Frum, *How We Got Here, The 70's: The Decade That Brought You Modern Life (For Better Or Worse)* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 12.

<sup>37</sup>Schrader, 7.

narrative's racist overtone, the scene signifies a blue-collar perspective and that it delves into the inner city. Travis tells a passenger that the whole city reminds him an open sewer. His ultra-conservative views offer a comparison to "All in the Family's" main character, Archie Bunker. Norman Lear's portrait of the American Family presents one of the nation's political battlegrounds between blue-collar resentments and intrusions of the liberal state.<sup>38</sup> Archie embodies America's traditional blue-collar ethics. He opposes liberals, represented by his son-in-law, and minorities like his African-American neighbors, the Jeffersons. Blue-collar outrage reached a peak in May of 1970. Following the Kent State Massacre, a group of two hundred construction workers confronted antiwar protestors in New York City. The "hard hats" armed with hammers and pliers assaulted the "longhairs" to show "that we support Mr. Nixon."<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Travis emerges in *Taxi Driver* as an extreme version of Archie Bunker. Travis transforms the television patriarch's rhetoric into a violent form of self-expression.

The entrenchment of new conservatism enabled New York to compile discouraging statistics during the Seventies. Contributing to the national unemployment rate, New York lost 257,000 jobs in three years beginning in 1970. It had as many murders every ten days as England had in a year. Drug overdoses became the largest killer for people between the age of fifteen and thirty-five.<sup>40</sup> Of 260,739 arrests in 1974, 43,831 were violent crimes.<sup>41</sup> After 1976,

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<sup>38</sup>Carroll, 62.

<sup>39</sup>Carroll, 57.

<sup>40</sup>Robert Hargreaves, *Superpower: A Portrait of America in the 70s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1973), 31.

<sup>41</sup>Robert Fishman, *Criminal Recidivism in New York City: An Evaluation of the Impact of Rehabilitation and Diversion Services* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1977), 2.

voter turnout amounted to 50 percent in presidential elections and 33 percent in off-years.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Jimmy Carter attempted to restore confidence in federal politics, the sphere of public life that had landed the country in Vietnam and economic limbo. In response to the neglect of American cities from abandoned renewal programs, Carter proposed a 178-page comprehensive urban policy.<sup>43</sup> Although addressing the problem, the new president from Georgia did not have the same perspective of inner city scum as Travis Bickle.

*Taxi Driver's* story unfolds as the audience watches Travis drive around the city. After working twelve hours shifts, Travis still cannot sleep. He wanders around the city, frequents adult movies, pops pills, and drinks brandy. Upon returning to his apartment, he keeps a journal. On April 10, 1972, he thanks God for the rain which helped wash the garbage off the sidewalks. Another night in the cab, he carries a man and a prostitute and Travis thinks, "All the animals come out at night," he categorizes them and continues, "Someday a *real* rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets."<sup>44</sup> In spite of his aversion to the city's "scum," Travis' exploration of a growing sector of New York's consumerism motivates him to take action.

"Adults Only," by Peter Braunstein traces the history of pornography that became a noticeable cultural feature of New York in the 1970s. A series of court cases and legislation followed a loosening of views on sexuality in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. The result was the creation of a new frontier of smut. Although President Nixon supported a wave of vice-related laws as part of his broader campaign of "law and order," the Supreme Court amended the

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<sup>42</sup>Frum, 284.

<sup>43</sup>Schulman, 123.

<sup>44</sup>Schrader, 13.

1957 Roth decision concerning obscenity in 1973. It ruled that local communities should determine standards for obscenity. Thereafter, New York embraced a very permissive interpretation of such standards.

Braunstein argues that “Times Square was never sleazier than in the 1970s” when “sex cinema” reached “its golden age.” The film industry established its current rating system in 1968. Thus, the Motion Picture Association of America abandoned its restrictive Hays Code. CARA (Code and Rating Administration) provided an X rating for explicit material and “XXX” labels became popular marketing strategies for pornographers.<sup>45</sup> The box-office successes of *Deep Throat* (1972) and *Emmanuelle* (1974) signify a widening audience for pornography and an evolution from peep shows that filled stores on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street during the period.<sup>46</sup> A scene from *Taxi Driver* depicts Travis aiming his finger, like a gun and firing it, at images on an adult movie screen. This glimpse of Travis beginning to act out his fantasies not only foreshadows the film’s climax but signifies a source of his inner rage. *Taxi Driver’s* graphic violence and gore represent one of several mainstream films that ironically pushed the limits of the R-rating with its release.<sup>47</sup>

Schrader alludes to a quote from “God’s Lonely Man,” an essay by Thomas Wolfe, to characterize Travis.<sup>48</sup> His antihero’s loneliness enhances his disgust at the world around him. A

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<sup>45</sup>David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2000), 282.

<sup>46</sup>Peter Braunstein, “Adults Only,” in *America in the 70s*, eds. Beth Baily and David Farber (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 133-135.

<sup>47</sup>Cook, 146.

<sup>48</sup>Kelly, 87.



scholar who predates Christopher Lasch's famous assault on America's obsession with self defines another interpretation of the culture's collective narcissism. In *Decadence*, James Hougan views American culture as "an impersonation, a pretense at being." He argues that only an extreme form of isolation can insulate one from the media's flow of news and propaganda, which reinforces collective narcissism.<sup>49</sup> Although he tries, Travis fails to conform to the period's cultural norms. He follows Hougan's prescription and embraces an absolute form of isolation. If Travis were content or able to relate with other cabbies then his perspective of urban decay would appear less disturbing. Therefore, Travis' troubled mind brings the city's steam into focus. In an era of rising crime and declining enforcement, Travis reaches a breaking point and decides to take matters into his own hands.

The Sixties supplied America with an abundance of heroes. John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Muhammad Ali each challenged the established authority and confronted society's problems. Although the 1960s emphasized social justice as its guiding principle, the Nixon administration had difficulties enforcing "law and order," their keynote concern beginning in 1970. Increases in violent crimes made the installation of burglar alarms become common. Another indicator comes from changes in funding by federal, state, and local taxes between 1970-74 and affected urban programs. For instance, crime prevention and police enforcement decreased 16 percent.<sup>50</sup> The "Summer of Sam" witnessed David Berkowitz' year-long murderous spree killing six people in 1976. An overall surge in senseless acts of violent

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<sup>49</sup>James Hougan, *Decadence: Radical Nostalgia, Narcissism, and Decline in the Seventies* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1975), 152.

<sup>50</sup>Maus and Wolfe, 418.

crimes and other high profile cases like the Manson “family” murders left Americans feeling fearful and panicky.<sup>51</sup> By 1977, the Supreme court reversed itself and interpreted capital punishment as a constitutional right. Nevertheless, the nation lost faith in its institutions to enforce the law and lacked inspiring leaders comparable to previous years.

Films made during the Seventies increasingly focused on crime ridden settings and antiheroes emerged to confront the nation’s problems. They echoed fears that the authorities could not protect its citizens. Vigilante revenge scenarios, typical in the Western genre, moved from the country to the city and mirrored social trends. In fact, John Ford’s classic *The Searchers* (1956) influenced Scorsese’s vision of *Taxi Driver* in its subplot about rescuing a young prostitute from her pimp.<sup>52</sup> Antiheroes of urban vigilante films such as *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish* confronted the menacing threats pervading the country’s cities on their own terms. Both Harry Callahan and Paul Kersey, played by Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson respectively, perceive their criminal adversaries as aided by an ineffective liberal state and caused by the social permissiveness of previous years.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, other significant movies of the decade, such as *M\*A\*S\*H* (1971) and *The Godfather* (1972) reflect America’s disillusionment and pessimism. For example, *The Godfather* films present the police and the courts just as crookedly as the gangsters. *Taxi Driver*’s violence represents Travis’ reaction to his hostile environment. Violence itself represents a variation of alienation and loneliness,

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<sup>51</sup>Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 177-179.

<sup>52</sup>Cook, 145.

<sup>53</sup>Eric Porter, “Affirming and Disaffirming Actions,” in *America in the 70s*, eds. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 68.

which comprise the basic themes of the period's films.<sup>54</sup> Thus, Travis Bickle becomes another antihero of Seventies cinema and his actions symbolize the cultural quest for self-fulfillment.

*Taxi Driver* is more artistic than *Dirty Harry* or *Death Wish* because its personal roots add a dimension of realism. The film's violence served as a cathartic expression of its creators. The collaboration of Scorsese and Schrader not only illustrates a city and disturbed cabby. The film does not use violence simply to shock audiences either. *Taxi Driver's* narrative form and other technical aspects create a surrealistic aura that transcends the urban vigilante genre.

Scorsese uses the camera as an extension of Travis' eyes. The film reveals his perspective of the city. In some instances, Scorsese intentionally pans the camera away from the action as a metaphor to signify Travis' increasing sense of alienation. DeNiro's eyes transmit Travis' insanity in closeups and express his moments of madness. His method approach to acting lends itself to becoming more like the characters he plays. Lastly, the film's musical score adds an essential layer to the film's overall mood and impact on audiences.

Some filmmakers began to abandon the composition of original musical scores in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Highly popular films such as *Easy Rider* (1969) and *American Graffiti* (1973) represent innovations in their use of music that initiated a new trend. Instead of original scores, filmmakers selected popular songs from the periods in which their narratives are set. Rock 'n' roll soundtracks not only appealed to younger audiences but created a sense of nostalgia for America's past. Martin Scorsese applied this technique in *Mean Streets* (1973). He used a series of songs from his youth that reminded him of experiences growing up in New

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<sup>54</sup>Myron A. Marty, *Daily Life in the United States, 1960-1990: Decades of Discord* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), 119.

York that related to the setting of his film. Scorsese continued to use this style in his later films like *Goodfellas* (1990) and *Casino* (1995) because it allows a period's music to bring audiences back in time. Paradoxically, this new approach in film criticizes modern problems by using music of the past and reflects social trends during the 1970s as well.

Commenting on film music of the 1970s, John Williams recognized “a regressive, and in many ways, decadent period in movie scoring.” He argues that audiences wanted to be overwhelmed by the music or “wiped out” by the sounds of a full orchestra.<sup>55</sup> *Taxi Driver's* score defies Scorsese's previous musical decisions, invokes the period's nostalgic sentiments, and complements the thoughts and emotions of the film's main character. Scorsese hired Bernard Herrmann to compose an original score for his film. Herrmann's other famous credits include the music from *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *Psycho* (1960). He signed on to the project after reading Schrader's script. Scorsese dedicated the film to Herrmann's memory because he died just hours after completing his work.<sup>56</sup> His score creates a sense of nostalgia in two ways. It presents a traditional style of filmmaking in opposition to the latest trend and also sounds like music of film *noir*, a genre from America's postwar period. Music from film *noir* possesses hauntingly dark melodies that reinforce its stories' ambiguity between good and evil.

Herrmann's score possesses a romantic quality in some instances and an unnerving disharmony in others to complement Travis' changing moods. When Travis seems calm, the music flows gently with a tenor saxophone carrying the melody. Other times, the score

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<sup>55</sup>Cook, 54.

<sup>56</sup>The Internet Movie Database, “Bernard Herrmann,” <<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0002136/>> (2005).

screeches to a halt from the ringing tones of Herrmann's brass section, making the music become more ominous to comply with Travis' dismay or surprise. Therefore, the music embodies Travis' subjective viewpoints throughout the film. In one scene, Travis drives down the street while the music presents a serene melody. Suddenly, Travis slams on his brakes to avoid hitting a young girl. The score changes instantly to a darker quality and expresses his alarm by sustaining high-pitched notes that are slightly off key. As the music continues, its slow pace and softness conveys Travis' curiousness while his cab crawls after her. Just as Travis' taxi serves as an extension of his character, symbolic of his protective shell from the outside world, the music also functions to guide the narrative. Herrmann's score represents as much of a vital element in constructing Travis Bickle as Schrader's script and DeNiro's mannerisms. Overall, its hypnotic charm captures Travis' obsession to eradicate the city's scum and emphasizes the period's longing for the past.

While viewers may shudder while they watch *Taxi Driver*, Jack Kroll believed Travis' mind is simply the extreme form of a common condition.<sup>57</sup> The film and its main character represent the struggle of confronting society's challenges. The fact that Travis displays disturbing behaviors and serves as the film's hero signifies the absurdity, uncertainty, and anxiety of the Seventies. Before deciding to transform himself from a cabby into Dirty Harry, Travis meets Betsy.

In a voice-over, Travis thinks, "I first saw her at Palantine Campaign Headquarters at 58<sup>th</sup> and Broadway...She appeared like an angel out of this open sewer. Out of this filthy mess."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Kroll, 83.

<sup>58</sup>Schrader, 22.

Travis sits in his cab and watches Betsy, played by Cybil Shepherd, who works for the presidential campaign of Senator Charles Palantine. Surprisingly, Travis walks into her office one day and asks her on a date. Betsy accepts. Travis records their first date in his journal and writes, "I had black coffee and apple pie with a slice of melted yellow cheese. I think that was a good selection."<sup>59</sup> She tells him that he reminds her of a song by Kris Kristofferson about a man who is prophet and a pusher, a walking contradiction. Betsy's assessment of Travis was very accurate.

Travis continually displays his inability to fit into the cultural trends of the Seventies. Norman Mailer summarized the decade as one in which people who put an emphasis on the surface and image became popular because nothing deeper was going on.<sup>60</sup> Christopher Lasch described the emergence of a new mood of continual self-improvement in *The Culture of Narcissism*. Lasch lamented Americans' preoccupation with mental health and saw therapy displacing politics.<sup>61</sup> Travis does not believe in a life dedicated to morbid self attention. He is like an alien in a foreign land. In response to Betsy's comment about Kris Kristofferson, Travis says, "I'm no pusher...Honest. I never have pushed," further revealing his social inadequacies.<sup>62</sup> Travis takes Betsy to an adult movie theater on their second date. By revealing his dark side to her, Travis ruins his chances with Betsy. Later, a young prostitute calls Travis a "square" and a

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<sup>59</sup>Schrader, 35.

<sup>60</sup>Norman Mailer, "Mailer on the '70s-Decade of 'Image, Skin Flicks and Porn,'" *U.S. News & World Report*, 10 December 1979, 57.

<sup>61</sup>Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), 13.

<sup>62</sup>Lasch, 40.

“narc.” Paul Schrader even intended his name to connote a contradictory sense of existence. Travis, meaning traveled one, contrasts with the funny “k” sound from his last name, Bickle. By the end of the film, Travis becomes less of a contradiction and more representative of narcissistic cultural trends. He finds his niche by embracing violence, which becomes symbolic of his search for meaning in a time of uncertainty.

After failing miserably with Betsy, Travis begins to live out his fantasies by planning to remove the scum from the streets. Two weeks after their date, Travis tries to express his thoughts to a cab driver named Wizard. He tells him, “I have some bad ideas in my head.” Travis is visibly distraught. Wizard espouses a pseudo intellectual, existential anecdote to Travis, which does not make any sense. Travis tells Wizard that it was about the “dumbest thing he ever heard,” and adds to his feeling of isolation and disillusionment.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, Travis’ violent expressions symbolize his personal crusade against, and the film’s criticism of, American culture.

Schrader based Travis’ inner search on Jean-Paul Sartre’s protagonist in *Nausea*. Roquentin, Sartre’s hero, turns within and asks himself, “Should I exist?” He contemplates the possibility that nothingness might ultimately result from his life. However, Roquentin realizes that his life’s choices will culminate in creating his essence, his self, to counter the emptiness of his existence.<sup>64</sup> Existential literature’s relevance to understanding American culture in the 1970s relates to the increasing presence of psychotherapy, quests for self-fulfillment, and other forms of self-actualization during the decade. Wayne Dyer’s popular self-help book of the period,

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<sup>63</sup>*Taxi Driver*, DVD.

<sup>64</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (New York: New Directions Paperbook, 1964), xii-xiii.

*Your Erroneous Zones* (1976), affirms a similar sentiment that “you are the sum total of your choices.”<sup>65</sup> Another European literary hero also served as the genesis of *Taxi Driver*’s hero. Travis’ role as a social critic came from Dostoevsky’s hero in *Notes From Underground* (1864). Schrader sets Travis in a contemporary context on the American streets.<sup>66</sup> Regardless of Schrader’s influences, Travis’ actions qualify as fitting into the culture of narcissism and mirror American culture’s various self-fulfillment strategies, prominent throughout the 1970s. At home, Travis watches Palantine on television. The senator expresses his optimism that people will confront society’s challenges. Travis interprets the speech as a reason to kill Palantine.

Travis’ journal entries, inspired by George Wallace’s assassin, Arthur Bremer, document his plan. First, he gets organized. He buys a small arsenal of guns including a .44 Magnum revolver. An entry states, “May 29, 1972. I must get in shape. Too much sitting has ruined my body. Twenty-five pushups each morning, one hundred sit-ups. I have quit smoking.” He devotes his time to target practice and talks to himself in front of the mirror. He thinks, “The idea has been growing in my brain for some time. True Force. All the king’s men cannot put it back together again.”<sup>67</sup> The reference to Robert Penn Warren foreshadows the antihero’s intentions. Travis’ therapeutic regiment of self-help fits the cultural atmosphere of the Seventies. Competitive individualism prevailed after the collapse of postwar liberalism and

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<sup>65</sup>Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981), 236.

<sup>66</sup>Keyser, 70.

<sup>67</sup>Schrader, 67.



living for yourself became a dominant trend.<sup>68</sup> The average concern for Americans seeking personal fulfillment during the 1970s did not place an emphasis on public or social issues. Rather, fulfillment seekers sought ways to overcome personal weaknesses to overcome struggles from everyday life.<sup>69</sup> The origins of America's narcissistic trend that precipitates the "Me" Decade took place near the end of 1960s.

Politics became a path to self-fulfillment during the Sixties.<sup>70</sup> The civil rights movement showed organizations such as the SDS that nonviolent protests were an effective, responsible, and heroic form of expression.<sup>71</sup> However, outbreaks of violence extinguished the final hopes of the era by 1968. The Tet Offensive helped open America's eyes. The antiwar movement replaced civil disobedience with force at the National Democratic Convention in Chicago. The assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy typified the rise in violence and disillusionment. Protests began to instigate serious repercussions. The Kent State Massacre, the Black Panther Party, and acts of guerilla terrorism from campus militants escalated the mood of social upheaval in America. Chaos, uncertainty, and fear began to spread in the late Sixties and continued into the next decade. Public dissent persisted, though more self-fulfilling in their application, as an American tradition.

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<sup>68</sup>Lasch, 5.

<sup>69</sup>Yankelovich, 8.

<sup>70</sup>Alice Echols, "Women's Liberation and Sixties Radicalism," in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 164.

<sup>71</sup>Adam Garfinkle, *TellTale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 66.

Peter Clecak argues that “in somewhat less dramatic, less well-publicized, and often more personalized ways, dissent and protest remained dominant throughout the Seventies.”<sup>72</sup> He argues that popular films reflected this cultural trend. Peter Finch’s plea in *Network* (1976), “I’m as mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore,” reflects Americans’ desire to let out their personal frustrations.<sup>73</sup> In fact, Howard Jarvis, a crusader for California’s Proposition 13, adopted the film’s famous slogan in 1978 during his tax revolt in California.<sup>74</sup> Charles Bronson’s actions in *Death Wish* symbolize a rugged individualism in an urban landscape. Instead of trusting God to destroy the wicked or relying on the government, Bronson does the job himself.<sup>75</sup> Although Travis has a warped sense of how killing Palantine will help the city, his mission becomes a way for him to express dissent and even more a way to reach salvation. In accordance with the period’s pervading sense of an impending apocalypse, Travis plans to regenerate himself through violence like an avenging angel.<sup>76</sup>

The Seventies has been called the Third Great Awakening because of the surge in religious and spiritual revivals throughout the country. People often turn to God in times of need. A variety of Jesus movements, Oriental cults, and Gurus spread across America.<sup>77</sup> However, the spectrum of awakenings followed the nation’s tendency to waver between

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<sup>72</sup>Clecak, 19.

<sup>73</sup>Clecak, 225.

<sup>74</sup>Farber, 21.

<sup>75</sup>Clecak, 307.

<sup>76</sup>Christopher Sharrett, *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film* (Washington D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1993), 8.

<sup>77</sup>Szulc, 324.

conservative and radical ideologies. A backlash from the right criticized the shortcomings of postwar liberalism and awoke Christian movements during the late Sixties into the Seventies. Many Southern-based groups, such as Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, sought to bring America "back" to "Biblical principles." Their dissent voiced under the guise of Christianity attacked liberalism, its social ethics, and the welfare state.<sup>78</sup> Thus, religion appropriated political initiatives and created an ultra-Conservative faction in America.

The common denominator between the religious right and its ideological opponents focused on ways to reach salvation. People less inclined to believe in a higher power gravitated toward intellectual explanations of the country's malaise. Former radicals of the Sixties counterculture like Jerry Rubin exchanged political slogans for therapeutic ones during the Seventies. Americans, like Rubin, became obsessed with mental health, turned to therapists instead of priests, and looked for peace of mind rather than spiritual transcendence. Nevertheless, movements of self-awareness that Rubin embraced in San Francisco between 1971-75 represents a left of center, application of spiritual principles.<sup>79</sup> The wide range of paths pointed toward self-fulfillment shared in common expressions of dissent. Reactions to social changes and cultural crises, whether choosing a life devoted to Christianity or Hinduism, reflected the need to escape sources of personal and public hardship. In *Taxi Driver*, Travis intertwines the two.

Travis creates his own religion based on the belief in force. The *Village Voice* interviewed Scorsese and asked, "You mean, Travis thought if he did that killing, New York

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<sup>78</sup>Clecak, 140.

<sup>79</sup>Lasch, 15.

City would be clean?" The film's director answered, "Yeah."<sup>80</sup> Lasch advised readers that, "citizens will have to take the solution of their problems into their own hands," to combat a dying culture in the Seventies. Travis employs Lasch's suggestion and even marks his bullets with crosses. He writes, "Here is a man who wouldn't take it anymore, a man who stood up against the scum, the dogs, the filth." By personalizing his expression of dissent, Travis serves as an example of America's adversary culture diffusing throughout society during the Seventies. Ready and waiting for his chance to kill Palantine, Travis meets Iris.

One night, a scared young girl gets in Travis' cab. A man quickly grabs her from the cab and throws Travis some money. Days later, Travis almost hits the same girl with his cab because two men fighting in the street distracted him. He follows her and learns that the twelve-year-old girl, named Iris, played by Jodie Foster, is a prostitute. Travis meets Sport, Iris' pimp, played by Harvey Keitel and listens to his prices for her services. The scene with Sport mirrors reports of vice-related consumerism characteristic during the period. Peter Braunstein lists prostitution price structures in his essay "Adults Only" that are very similar to the dialogue in *Taxi Driver*. He describes rates such as "seventeen dollars for thirty minutes" with a "masseur" that were "less-than-coy fronts for prostitution in New York by the early 1970s."<sup>81</sup> Travis befriends Iris and wants to help her get away from her pimp and life as a drug-addicted prostitute. She turns him down but appreciates his willingness to help her. They have breakfast the next morning and talk about the cops' ineffectiveness and Travis lies to her about his secret work for the government. Iris not only represents social problems associated with runaway

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<sup>80</sup>Goldstein and Jacobson, 30.

<sup>81</sup>Braunstein, 134-135.

youths, childhood prostitution, and drug use. She represents an outlet for Travis to channel his narcissistic search for meaning. He believes he can become her savior.

*Taxi Driver* does not address the origins of America's contemporary social problems. Travis' view from his windshield is all that is revealed to the audience. Thus, his perspective functions as a self-imposed monitor.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, debates on society's problems during the Seventies included topics of alienation among blue-collar workers, drug problems, and street crime. A study conducted in 1974 found that workers with socially isolated jobs had difficulty integrating into community life.<sup>83</sup> Although Travis encountered people in his job, he was still socially isolated because of his psychotic thoughts and his inability to relate with others. The study also showed that addiction to heroin increased the likeliness of other criminal behavior. The number of addicts increased between 1961-70 because costs of heroin declined since the Mafia controlled the international drug trade. By meeting Iris, Travis exposes each example of the study's findings. Iris' fate becomes linked to Travis' plan to kill Palantine and culminates in the film's climactic bloodbath.

Travis appears at a Palantine rally with his head shaved into a Mohawk, the style used by the Special Forces on search-and-destroy-missions.<sup>84</sup> His frightening appearance signals the senator's secret service men and he barely gets away after his plan fails. Travis redirects his cathartic rage to rescuing Iris. He turns his wrath on a pimp, a gangster, and a slum lord. After

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<sup>82</sup>Stephen P. Miller, *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 98.

<sup>83</sup>John B. Williamson, Jerry F. Boren, and Linda Evans, eds. *Social Problems: The Contemporary Debates*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, Inc., 1974), 330.

<sup>84</sup>Keyser, 73.

killing them all, Travis tries to shoot himself but runs out of bullets as the police enter the building. Ironically, newspapers hail Travis as a hero. *Taxi Driver* ends ambiguously as Travis continues to drive a cab but seems relieved of his torment.

Peter Biskind, a critic for *Premiere*, agrees that the film's climax still appears as one of the most gruesome displays of onscreen violence in film history.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, Travis represents proof that politicians lied to Americans during Vietnam. His violence symbolizes the war's legacy that Johnson, Kissinger, and Nixon tried to deny. Drug use, prostitution, black marketing, and My Lai were supposedly thousands of miles away. Travis remains faithful to values learned in Vietnam. His actions embody the message that "might makes right," and exposes the problems of Southeast Asia in urban America.<sup>86</sup> Travis' behavior also represents symptoms from wartime trauma. Veterans afflicted with post-traumatic stress disorder display tendencies toward violence, hypervigilance, and restlessness.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, Travis' actions originate from a combination of Vietnam Syndrome and his direct exposure to discouraging examples of urban decay that he witnessed as a cabby. Robert Lindsey, a *New York Times* film critic, commented on the film's urban brutality. He writes insightfully that, "The city was New York, but it could have been any large American city of the seventies."<sup>88</sup> Other urban war zones appear throughout the country that follow New York's decaying trends as the decade's economic

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<sup>85</sup>"The Film School Generation," *American Cinema*, DVD.

<sup>86</sup>Keyser, 73.

<sup>87</sup>Richard A. Kulka, et al., *Trauma and the Vietnam War Generation: Report of Findings from the National Veterans Readjustment Study* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1990), 139.

<sup>88</sup>Robert Lindsey, "The Director of *Taxi Driver* Shifts Gear," *New York Times*, 1 March 1976, 11.

instability compounded hardships for its inhabitants.<sup>89</sup>

The film proved itself a box-office success and made \$12.6 million in domestic rentals. Although it only turned an average profit, it earned Scorsese support for his next projects.<sup>90</sup> *Taxi Driver* also established Robert Deniro as one of the most sought after and bankable stars in the industry.<sup>91</sup> It won the Golden Palm award at the 1976 Cannes Film Festival, and earned four Oscar nominations. Columbia Pictures took a risk with its disturbing subject matter, its alienated antihero, and its graphic violence. Still, audiences related to the film and especially to Travis Bickle because they lived with a growing sense of impending doom during the Seventies. The national recession and the onset of stagflation escalated the crisis of confidence.<sup>92</sup> *Taxi Driver's* gripping images of America's underbelly represent the consequences of a society choosing to ignore public issues. At the same time, it criticizes America's self-absorbed state that refuses to fix them. Travis' quest for self-fulfillment offered audiences a mirror image of its cultural trends and an escape from society's imposed feeling of helplessness.

Before embarking to assassinate Palantine, Travis reflected that, "Loneliness has followed me all my life. The life of loneliness pursues me wherever I go: in bars, cars, coffee shops, theaters, stores, sidewalks. There is no escape. I am God's lonely man."<sup>93</sup> The film's

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<sup>89</sup>Harrington, 183.

<sup>90</sup>Cook, 146.

<sup>91</sup>Cook, 339.

<sup>92</sup>Robert M. Collins, "Growth Liberalism," in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 37.

<sup>93</sup>Schrader, 107.

memorable characterization of Travis not only embodies his perspective but also is indicative of American culture during the Seventies. Travis' loneliness symbolizes the nation's despair. Then he thinks, "I know there is no longer any hope. I cannot continue this hollow, empty fight. What hope is there for me?"<sup>94</sup> His feelings reflect the topics that Carter referred to in his speech on the country's malaise in 1979. How was America to find new resources of energy? What would it take to restore the feeling of security in America's cities? An apocalyptic mood descended upon America during the Seventies. Any open-minded viewer of *Taxi Driver* in 1976, who saw past Travis' psychosis, could relate with his disenchanting view of America. Whether a Vietnam veteran, disillusioned voter, or blue-collar worker watches *Taxi Driver*, the film engages its audience and illustrates a period encapsulated by despair and self-absorption.

Irving Thalberg said, "If we were to come back a thousand years from today and try to find some form of expression that clearly showed how we live today, it would have to be the motion pictures."<sup>95</sup> *Taxi Driver* represents only one of many films that illustrates sentiments of the Seventies. Urban vigilantism, Vietnam's legacy, distrusting the government, and a culture in search of meaning became the predominant themes in American cinema. *The French Connection* (1971) and *Serpico* (1973) also illustrate images of New York similar to *Taxi Driver* and support the notion that American cities were dying national structures.<sup>96</sup> Therefore, films of the period can offer countless lessons about the cultural impact from social changes.

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<sup>94</sup>Schrader, 107.

<sup>95</sup>Irving Thalberg, "Lecture at the University of Southern California," quoted in Lary May, *Screening Out the Past* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), xi.

<sup>96</sup>Miller, 85.



Consequently, John Hinckley claimed that watching the film 15 times caused him to try to kill President Reagan. Hinckley thought his action would impress Jodie Foster.<sup>97</sup> No matter how often a person watches *Taxi Driver*, ultimately, the film is a historical document about the boiling pressure from America's urban crisis. Another prominent filmmaker, and like Scorsese a fellow New Yorker, emerged whose work revitalized the city's image in contrast to films of the decade that focus on its squalor. Although Woody Allen glorifies his favorite American city in his opus, *Annie Hall*, he also criticizes the nation's cultural trends of the 1970s.

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<sup>97</sup>Keyser, 83.

## CHAPTER 2

### *ANNIE HALL*: A DECADE IN NEED OF THERAPY, MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS (OR SIFTING THE PIECES), AND CRITICIZING THE CULTURE OF NARCISSISM

Scholarship often applies a somber tone to events of the 1970s. The legacy of Vietnam, Watergate, and the political ineffectiveness of Ford and Carter leave optimistic pundits little to write about the period. *Time* declares, “Nobody is apt to look back on the 1970s as the good old days.”<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, the decade produced a cultural revolution under the surface of major events that began to revive an ailing nation. Overwhelming disillusionment confronted people to make sense of national crises as traditional postwar political and economic institutions continued to erode throughout the decade. A series of grass roots responses to national woes and a resurgence of conservatism ultimately brought the decade of despair to a close. However, individualistic quests for personal fulfillment emerged as a dominant American trend throughout the latter part of the 1970s. Consequently, another film about an urban American experience set in New York City with an intellectual brand of comedy rather than a *noir* display of violence, helped audiences adjust to and relate with the culture’s narcissistic trends.

*Annie Hall* begins with Woody Allen, the film’s writer, director, and leading male actor looking directly into the camera and speaking to the audience. Casting himself as Alvy Singer, an urban everyman, Allen summarizes his view of life using an old joke. Alvy says, “Two elderly women are at a Catskills mountain resort, and one of ‘em says: ‘Boy, the food at this place is really terrible.’ The other one says, ‘Yeah, I know, and such small portions.’” Alvy

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<sup>98</sup>quoted in Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982), ix. Also see *Time* magazine, 1979, 24, quoted in Slocum-Schaffer.

explains that the joke encompasses how he feels about life. He describes life as, “Full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness, and it’s all over much too quickly.”<sup>99</sup> Alvy’s opening monologue introduces viewers to *Annie Hall*’s personal and introspective perspective. The film’s fragmented narrative shows memories of better times for Alvy. An overriding sense of nostalgia represents a pertinent and recurring theme in America during the 1970s.

Allen’s work has been regarded “as a sort of cultural barometer.” His Oscar-winning film of 1977 and its history reveals how and why he distills humor from daily frustrations of American life.<sup>100</sup> Whereas Scorsese looks at the city’s decaying urban landscape as motivating Travis’ wrathful form of self-fulfillment in *Taxi Driver*, Allen’s comedy ironically glorifies the same city as the pinnacle of America’s cultural experience. *Annie Hall*’s views on therapy, relationships, and the culture of narcissism illustrate Allen’s contribution to understanding the period’s social trends. Although the film’s subject seems self-indulgent, it mirrored America’s search for personal fulfillment, and established Woody Allen as one of America’s leading film auteurs and an F. Scott Fitzgerald of the 1970s.

*Annie Hall*’s basic premise focuses on Alvy Singer’s recounting of his failed relationship with the film’s title character, Annie, played by Diane Keaton. In the opening monologue, Alvy says, “Annie and I broke up and I...I still can’t get my mind around that...I keep sifting the pieces o’ the relationship through my mind and examining my life and trying’ to figure out where did

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<sup>99</sup>Woody Allen, *Four Films of Woody Allen* (New York: Random House, 1980), 4.

<sup>100</sup>Douglas Brode, *Woody Allen: His Films And Career* (New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1985), 21.

the screw-up come.”<sup>101</sup> One of Allen’s biographers interprets Alvy’s “sifting the pieces” as a major influence on the narrative form. The film unfolds in bits and pieces from Alvy’s frequently exaggerated, subjective perspective of his experiences with Annie, friends, and family. Alvy’s ambivalence to confront and avoid traumatic memories results in the film’s discontinuity rather than following a chronological order.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, *Annie Hall’s* audience becomes Alvy’s therapist, listening and analyzing scenes from his life.

Alvy first meets Annie at a doubles tennis match with friends. The scene unfolds in one of the film’s many flashbacks. After playing, Alvy gets a ride with Annie back to her apartment. Annie asks Alvy upstairs and he agrees because he has nothing to do until his analyst’s appointment. Annie says somewhat surprised, “Oh, you see an analyst?” Alvy replies, “Y-y-yeah, just for fifteen years.”<sup>103</sup> Responding to Annie’s disbelief, Alvy says sarcastically that he plans on giving him one more year before he goes to Lourdes, a famous French sanitarium known for its medically unexplainable cures.<sup>104</sup> Later in their relationship, Annie takes Alvy to meet her family and her mother says, “Ann tells us that you’ve been seeing a psychiatrist for fifteen years.” Alvy sets down his glass, coughs, and says, “Yes. I’m making excellent progress. Pretty soon when I lie down on his couch, I won’t have to wear the lobster bib.”<sup>105</sup> Establishing

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<sup>101</sup>Allen, 4.

<sup>102</sup>Maurice Yacowar, *Loser Take All* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1979), 172.

<sup>103</sup>Allen, 36.

<sup>104</sup>Rev. Msgr. Kevin Wallin, “A Visit To Lourdes,” <<http://www.spirituality.org/issue10/10page04.html>> (2005).

<sup>105</sup>Allen, 55.

Alvy's neurotic disposition introduces therapy as a motif of the film. The film refers to therapy mostly as analysis and plays a major role in the lives of several other characters throughout the story.

Seeking therapy for mental health was definitely not new in 1977. Psychologists, marriage counselors, and educational reformers recommended a therapeutic outlook beginning in the twenties and thirties as a way to liberate people from personal obstacles.<sup>106</sup> However, the "Me" Decade's use of it as a tool of personal fulfillment made it more widespread and a dominant cultural feature during the 1970s. A study by Daniel Yankelovich concludes that nearly all of American society became involved with some form of therapeutics by the end of the decade. "It is as if tens of millions of people had decided simultaneously to conduct risky experiments in living, using the only materials that lay at hand...their own lives."<sup>107</sup>

Some scholars attribute the opportunity for Americans to indulge in searching for fulfillment to the economy. The postwar industrial boom enabled a greater dispersal of Americans to enjoy products and lifestyles once accustomed to the upper classes. America's age of affluence and prosperity planted the seeds for a democratization of personhood to occur. The ideals of postwar liberalism advocated and provided for the social justice movements of the 1960s. However, when post-Watergate disillusionment set in and America found itself plagued with economic problems including stagflation, unemployment, and poverty, the quest for self did not end. Peter Clecak argues that the economy seemed far worse than it was. In spite of scarcity

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<sup>106</sup>Peter Clecak, *America's Quest for the Ideal Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 251.

<sup>107</sup>Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981), quoted in Clecak, 152.

for the unemployed and poverty stricken areas, gains in overall wealth and consumption, shown by statistics of a rising GNP, allowed the search for fulfillment to continue.<sup>108</sup> No longer confined to just privileged classes, greater numbers of politically apathetic and socially discouraged Americans sought personal well being. They went to analysts, exercise classes, practiced meditation, and focused on themselves. Andrew Hacker concludes America was at the point when, “a preoccupation with private concerns deflects a population from public obligations.”<sup>109</sup> Christopher Lasch labeled the decade’s therapeutic sensibility the faith of the faithless.<sup>110</sup>

If Lasch’s dubious distinctions and generalizations from *The Culture of Narcissism* could produce a mascot, Alvy Singer fits the descriptions. Writing about the 1970s, Lasch argues that mental health serves as the modern equivalent to salvation. “Therapists, not priests” have become the main ally for the “psychological man” of the twentieth century.<sup>111</sup> He describes the new narcissist as driven by his anxiety, depression, and sense of inner emptiness as the sources to find meaning in life.<sup>112</sup> Lasch attributes narcissistic trends to a reaction of the political turmoil from the 1960s. Without the hope of improving society, “people have convinced

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<sup>108</sup>Ibid, 192.

<sup>109</sup>Andrew Hacker, *The End of the American Era*, quoted in Myron A. Marty, *Decades of Discord* (London: The Greenwood Press, 1997), xvii.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid, 251.

<sup>111</sup>Lasch, 13.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid, xvi.

themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement.”<sup>113</sup> Consequently, Lasch argues that narcissists cannot find real fulfillment. Salvation will forever elude them because they suffer from a syndrome in which “love rejected turns back to the self as hatred.”<sup>114</sup> In fact, Woody Allen’s original title for *Annie Hall*, *Anhedonia*, describes a human condition that means the inability to experience joy and fits Lasch’s cultural assessment. Alvy’s personal outlook of life provides deeper insight to his neurotic state of mind.

While browsing in a bookstore, Alvy decides to buy *Death and Western Thought* and *The Denial of Death* for Annie. Death is a big subject for Alvy. He admits that it’s an obsession. Then he explains his pessimistic view of life to her. “You should know this about me if we’re gonna go out. I-I-I feel that life is-is divided up into the horrible and the miserable...Those are the two categories.”<sup>115</sup> He defines the horrible as terminal cases, blind and physically challenged people, and the miserable as everyone else. Alvy continues, “So-so when you go through life you should be thankful that you’re miserable, because that’s...You’re very lucky to be miserable.”<sup>116</sup> Jim Hougan, author of *Decadence*, assumes a position similar to Alvy’s outlook in his work to describe the 1970s. Hougan argues that pessimism about the larger world eases personal anxiety.<sup>117</sup> He views America cynically and analyzes its social disintegration, which Hougan offers as a comfort since progress usually results from failure. Thus, Hougan argues the

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<sup>113</sup>Ibid, 4.

<sup>114</sup>Quoted in Clecak, 250.

<sup>115</sup>Allen, 45.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid, 45.

<sup>117</sup>Clecak, 98.

cultural malaise of the 1970s was “something of a relief” because it marked a culmination of despair and a point at which to reexamine social goals for the future.<sup>118</sup> Alvy provides viewers living in an age of limits a twisted sense of gratitude in accordance with the period’s never-ending sense of crisis.

Shortly after the film’s opening monologue, Alvy describes his childhood through a series of flashbacks. Alvy insists that he was brought up in a house underneath the roller coaster in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn, accounting for his nervous personality. A scene shows Alvy at the doctor’s office with his mother. Alvy’s voice-over says, “I’m not a morose type. I’m not a depressive character. I was a reasonably happy kid, I guess.” Alvy, as a child, sits with his mother on a doctor’s sofa with his head down and appears completely defeated and withdrawn. Alvy’s mother complains to the doctor, “He’s been depressed. All of a sudden, he can’t do anything.” The doctor asks Alvy why he is depressed and his mother nudges him to tell Dr. Flicker what he read. Alvy says, “The universe is expanding...and if it’s expanding, someday it will break apart and that would be the end of everything!” Alvy’s mother shouts, “What is that your business? He stopped doing his homework.” Alvy rebuts, “What’s the point?” The doctor tells Alvy, “It won’t be expanding for billions of years yet...And we’ve gotta try to enjoy ourselves while we’re here. Uh?” Alvy’s somber reaction does not reflect the doctor’s amusement.

The cultural resonance to Alvy’s humorous memories becomes apparent when considering the decade in which Woody Allen created *Annie Hall*. Tragedies of the 1970s such as Jonestown, Three Mile Island, and Kent State gave many Americans the sense that the world

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<sup>118</sup>Clecak, 98.



was ending. Studies reported Americans feeling uneasy, pessimistic, and apprehensive. Gallup polls indicate that at the beginning of the decade, 21 percent of the country thought “next year will be worse than this year,” and by the end of the 1970s, 55 percent held this pessimistic outlook. Hadley Cantril, a psychologist and pollster revered by Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration, presented evidence in support of this trend. His survey reported that Americans’ belief of the present as superior to the past completely reversed itself by 1978, in which a majority of Americans thought the past looked better than the present. In addition, Cantril’s survey showed that dwindling hopes for the future contributed to a shift away from postwar optimism to bleakness.<sup>119</sup> A New York sales clerk summarized the impact of the decade by saying, “Things seem to be out of our control.”<sup>120</sup> Nevertheless, Alvy’s search for meaning continues throughout the film. Various moments of dialogue on his analyst’s couch, with friends, and random New Yorkers on the street reflect popular sentiments of a nation in despair.

Tom Wolfe describes “the spirit of the age” in his short story “The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” and coined the famous label of the 1970s.<sup>121</sup> The period experienced a surge of Americans seeking self-fulfillment through spiritual and religious avenues. Theodore Roszak, a historian, proclaimed the period “a time of religious awakening.”<sup>122</sup> The turbulence of

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<sup>119</sup>Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981), 182-183.

<sup>120</sup>Sheils et al., “I’m Scared, but I’m Optimistic,” *Newsweek*, (November 19, 1979), 157, quoted in Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 213.

<sup>121</sup>Tom Wolfe, *Mauve Gloves and Madmen, Clutter and Vine* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976).

<sup>122</sup>Quoted in Carroll, 247.

the late 1960s and early 1970s spread a popular sentiment in which Americans viewed human reason as representing evil and the desire to free themselves from it emerged amongst millions. Televangelism and the ascendance of the moral majority found strong support toward the end of the decade. However, there were alternatives to faith-based religions for people to cope with personal problems. Growing trends such as primal scream, bioenergetics, transcendental meditation, and yoga represent measures taken by Americans to treat psychological stress. Gallup reports indicate almost twenty million Americans used a variety of Eastern philosophies and disciplines.<sup>123</sup> Therefore, therapeutic movements began displacing orthodox religions throughout the period.<sup>124</sup> *Annie Hall* presents multiple characters who use various forms of therapy to find meaning from an array of personal issues.

Both Alvy and Annie visit psychiatrists and take part in psychoanalysis mainly to cope with problems in their relationship. Alvy encourages Annie to start seeing her analyst and even pays for her sessions. Annie and Alvy argue about it in a memorable scene, waiting in a movie line. Annie shows up late and tells Alvy, “I missed my therapy. I overslept.”<sup>125</sup> Alvy asks her if she realizes what a hostile gesture that is to him. Their dispute, which occurs very early in the film, signifies the existence of various conflicts going on between them. Returning home to their apartment after her first session, Alvy asks her about it. Annie tells him how she got in touch with repressed memories about her parents. Alvy says, “That’s amazing. I’ve been goin’ for fifteen years...nothing like that.” Then Annie continues and tells Alvy that after telling her

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<sup>123</sup>Carroll, 246.

<sup>124</sup>Ibid., 247-248.

<sup>125</sup>Allen, 14.

analyst about a dream, she cried. Alvy replies, “You cried? I’ve never once cried...Fantastic...I whine. I-I-I sit and I whine.”<sup>126</sup> In fact, Woody Allen continues seeing an analyst in his own life for good reasons. He says, “I feel if I lost some of these anxieties,” which he knows are common to everybody, “I’d be able to reach more of humanity with my work.”<sup>127</sup> Thus, Allen confesses to an aspect from his personal life that appears in his art.

Later in the film, a flashback of Alvy with his first wife shows them having similar problems. Robin tells Alvy, “I’m too tense. I need a Valium. My analyst says I should live in the country and not in New York.”<sup>128</sup> Another scene uses a split screen to present Alvy and Annie with their therapists at the same time. Although they discuss the same issue, each have opposing perspectives. When asked by each psychiatrist their rate of intercourse, Alvy describes it as, “Hardly ever. Maybe three times a week.” Annie answers, “Constantly! I’d say three times a week.” Then Alvy expresses his resentment and says, “The incredible thing about it is, I’m paying for her analysis and she’s making progress and I’m getting screwed.”<sup>129</sup> When they finally decide to break-up, Annie tells Alvy, “My analyst thinks this move is keen for me,” and Alvy responds, “You know, I trust her, because my-my analyst recommended her.”<sup>130</sup> Alvy puts his faith in experts instead of his own emotions.

Although Alvy’s chooses modern medicine and existential philosophy to find meaning,

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<sup>126</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>127</sup>Jack Kroll, “Woody: Funny, But He’s Serious,” *Newsweek*, (April 24, 1978), 66.

<sup>128</sup>Allen, 29.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid., 95.

he encounters other characters who share his pursuit of self-fulfillment but in very different ways. After having a fight with Annie on the street, she gets in a cab alone, and Alvy walks away talking to himself. He walks up to a man on the street and says, “Don’t go any further. Now, with your wife in bed, d-d-does she need some kind o’ artificial stimulation like-like marijuana?” Without any reservations, the man replies, “We use a large vibrating egg.” Alvy continues to walk and says to himself, “Large vibrating egg. Well, I ask a psychopath, I get that kind of answer.”<sup>131</sup> Alvy often contemplates peoples’ suggestions on life even when confronted by their absurdities.

While visiting Annie’s family, her brother Duane, played by Christopher Walken confesses a secret to Alvy because, “as an artist, I think you’ll understand,” he says. Duane tells Alvy that sometimes, while he drives, he has a sudden impulse to turn the wheel quickly and crash into the oncoming car. Duane morbidly describes the accident, telling Alvy that he can see the flames and hear the sound of shattering glass. After Duane finishes speaking, Alvy says, “Right...well, I have to go now, Duane, because I-I’m due back on the planet earth.”<sup>132</sup> Although Alvy consumes himself with his own neuroses regularly, he lacks empathy and patience with those of others.

Lastly, Alvy goes on a date with a reporter from *Rolling Stone* to see the Maharishi at Madison Square Garden during a separation from Annie. The scene parodies the popularity of Reverend Sun Myung Moon, who drew twenty thousand spectators to the Garden in September

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<sup>131</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>132</sup>Ibid., 58.

1974.<sup>133</sup> It signifies how the mood of the 1970s enabled spiritual leaders' the level of worship, comparable to rock stars of previous years. Pam, played by Shelly Duvall, tells Alvy, "He's God! I mean, this man is God! He's got millions of followers who would crawl all the way across the world just to touch the hem of his garment." Alvy jokes, "Really? It must be a tremendous hem." She tells Alvy that she's a Rosicrucian herself, which is a person who studies metaphysics and mysticism.<sup>134</sup> Alvy responds by telling her, "I can't get with any religion that advertises in *Popular Mechanics*."<sup>135</sup> Pam's character, a sort of spaced-out journalist, represents the 1970's cultural obsession with everything artificial and spiritual. Americans sought meaning and inspiration from unlikely sources. Remember, the decade produced novelties such as the pet rock and yellow happy face. Such popular trends presented simple and spurious substitutes to icons from traditional religious institutions, which experienced an overall decline during the 1970s.

To summarize each encounter, Alvy reflects his own neurotic impulses and cynical outlook on those around him. Woody Allen uses these scenes partly to make fun of the characters. He also uses them to evaluate Alvy's own self-absorbed lifestyle in contrast to other people's personal expressions. Comedy itself represents Allen's own form of psychoanalysis. He told *Newsweek*, "I was in analysis for years because of a traumatic childhood. I was breast-fed through falsies."<sup>136</sup> Consequently, *Annie Hall* not only embodies the period's therapeutic

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<sup>133</sup>Carroll, 248.

<sup>134</sup>Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, <<http://www.rosicrucian.org/>> (2005).

<sup>135</sup>Allen, 66.

<sup>136</sup>Jack Kroll, "Woody: Funny, But He's Serious," *Newsweek*, (April 24, 1978), 66.

sensibility and cultural shift from the external to the inner world, but also a closer examination of his relationship with Annie reveals shifting values that occur during the period as a result of America's individualistic preoccupations.

At the end of *Annie Hall*, Alvy summarizes his feelings about his relationships using an old joke. A guy goes to see a psychiatrist and says, "Doc, my brother's crazy. He thinks he's a chicken." The doctor says, "Well, why don't you turn him in?" The guy says, "I would, but I need the eggs." Alvy reflects on the joke's significance to his relationships and says, "You know, they're totally irrational and crazy and absurd and...but, uh, I guess we keep goin' through it because, uh, most of us need the eggs."<sup>137</sup> Alvy's outlook, a sort of trial and error approach to his love life coincides with common trends of the 1970s. By 1975 the "nuclear family" made up only 7 percent of the population.<sup>138</sup> The combination of loosening views on sexuality during the 1960s and impact of the search for self-fulfillment paved the way for a maturing generation of baby boomers to have more options to traditional choices. *Annie Hall* and subsequent films present images of the period's alternative living arrangements.

Diane Keaton's appearance in *Looking For Mr. Goodbar* (1977), the same year as *Annie Hall*, presents a film about the highs and lows of the period's single's scene. *Kramer Vs. Kramer* (1979), starring Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep, became the year's top grossing film and won Oscars for both actors. The latter film focuses on the impact of divorce on a couple's child and their lives. With the release of films focusing on socially relevant issues of the period,

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<sup>137</sup>Allen, 105.

<sup>138</sup>Myron A. Marty, *Decades of Discord* (London: The Greenwood Press, 1997), 181.

Stephen Farber signaled “the return of the grown-up movie.”<sup>139</sup> Although it uses comedy, *Annie Hall* reflects serious cultural tensions created by shifting values associated with ideals of the American family.

After a romantic walk around New York City, Annie tells Alvy that she really likes him. Alvy asks Annie the key question, “Do you love me?” She tells him that she does and asks him the same question. Alvy dodges the question however and teases her by saying, “love is, uh, is too weak a word for what...I...I lerve you. You know I lo-ove you, I-I loff you...I-I have to invent...Of course I love you.”<sup>140</sup> The very next scene shows Annie moving her things into Alvy’s apartment. The emergence of new ideas about personal commitments and trends that defy traditional institutions becomes a hallmark of 1970’s American culture.<sup>141</sup> A growing single’s scene gave American youths social alternatives to marriage, children, the suburbs, and homes with two-car garages.

Nearly two-thirds of all baby boomers, equaling fifty million Americans, were reaching adulthood by 1975. Many of them got married and started families, following their parents’ examples. However, the decade produced a rise in single-parent families because of accelerating divorce rates. Women married later, waited longer to have children, had fewer babies, and resulted in an overall decrease in births throughout the 1970s.<sup>142</sup> In contrast to the

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<sup>139</sup>David A. Cook, *Lost Illusion: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2000), 293.

<sup>140</sup>Allen, 47.

<sup>141</sup>Carroll, 295.

<sup>142</sup>Slocum-Schaffer, 170.

1950s, America's view of young adults' deliberate choice to avoid marriage shifted dramatically. Condemning attitudes of women who chose to remain unmarried shrank from 80 percent in 1957 to 25 percent by 1978.<sup>143</sup> Thus, baby boomers were instrumental in the emerging "single's culture," giving rise to bars, clubs, and residences catering to unmarried people.<sup>144</sup> Between 1970 and 1980, unmarried couples living together increased 50 percent. People living alone also increased by 60 percent. Singles' culture provided Americans' companionship and fun, free of obligation, and by 1974, causing a third of the population to consider marriage obsolete.<sup>145</sup> Having already married and divorced twice before meeting Annie, Alvy embodies the period's changing cultural norms as their relationship moves forward.

Alvy appears nervous and upset when he learns that Annie plans on giving up her apartment. They argue about her tiny, expensive apartment that has bad plumbing and bugs. Annie does not understand why she should keep it. She accuses him of not wanting to live with her. Alvy admits that although it was her idea, he approved it immediately. Then he says, "We live together, we sleep together, we eat together. Jesus, you don't want it to be like we're married, do yuh?" She asks, "How is it any different?" Alvy says, "It's different 'cause you keep you own apartment. Because you know it's there, we don't have to go to it, we don't have to deal with it, but it's like a-a-a free-floating life raft...that we know that we're not married."<sup>146</sup> Lasch defined "Love" as meaning submission to a higher loyalty and argues that it strikes

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<sup>143</sup>Yankelovich, 97.

<sup>144</sup>Slocum-Schaffer, 170.

<sup>145</sup>Ibid, 171.

<sup>146</sup>Allen, 49.



narcissistic personalities as intolerably oppressive. Similar to the outcome of Alvy and Annie's psychoanalytic sessions, the kind of love prescribed by therapists means simply fulfilling a patient's emotional requirements rather than subordinating their interests to those of others.<sup>147</sup>

Woody Allen himself was an active participant in the 1970's single's scene, having been married and divorced twice before his real-life relationship with Diane Keaton between 1969 and 1972. His behavior remains unchanged during the 1970s and into the 1980s. Allen actively dated women and costar Mia Farrow became his longest relationship until their separation in the early 1990s. Although they began a family, Allen and Farrow kept separate residences and did not marry. Allen apparently prefers the comfort of his own bed.<sup>148</sup> Part of an anti-Allen backlash misinterprets *Annie Hall's* message as affirming rather than criticizing the culture's trend of emotional shopping around and extending adolescence into middle age.<sup>149</sup>

Contemplating the decision to break-up with Annie, Alvy says, "A relationship, I think, is-is like a shark, you know? It has to constantly move forward or it dies. And I think what we got on our hands is a dead shark."<sup>150</sup> Allen's characters project the culture's shallow and selfish values running rampant in the 1970s.

Returning to the scene in which Alvy walks up to random people on the street, he asks a young, trendy-looking couple their secret to a healthy relationship. Alvy says to them, "You-you look like a really happy couple," and asks, "so h-h-how do you account for it?" The young

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<sup>147</sup>Lasch, 13.

<sup>148</sup>Marion Meade, *The Unruly Life of Woody Allen* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 165.

<sup>149</sup>Brode, 21.

<sup>150</sup>Allen, 93.

woman replies, “Uh, I’m very shallow and empty and I have no ideas and nothing interesting to say.” The man adds, “And I’m exactly the same way.”<sup>151</sup> Alvy acknowledges their mutual views and thanks them for talking to him. Allen continually depicts love as fleeting. Alvy confesses to an elderly woman on the street, “I can’t believe this. Somewhere she cooled off to me! Is it something I did?” The woman on the street says, “Never something you do. That’s how people are. Love fades.” Alvy reflects and repeats, “Love fades. God, that’s a depressing thought.”<sup>152</sup> Some critics have found redemptive qualities in *Annie Hall*’s view of the period’s relationships, emphasizing love as mutual self-sacrifice that enables one to grow.<sup>153</sup> Both characters’ eventual acceptance of their break-up benefits their emotional maturity. They remain friends and have a more stable sense of self by the end of the film than at the start. Moreover, *Annie Hall* really focuses on the fickleness of human emotions and how relationships change over time. Alvy’s gift to Annie on her birthday, a watch, symbolizes time ticking away in their relationship and their lives.

In the course of their relationship Alvy becomes a sort of mentor to Annie, which culminates in their break-up. Annie returns home after her first therapy session. She has a Freudian slip while recounting a dream with Alvy. In her dream, Frank Sinatra strangles Annie with a pillow. Alvy interprets it by saying, “Sure...because he’s a singer and you’re a singer, you know, so it’s perfect. So you’re trying to suffocate yourself. It-it makes perfect sense. That’s a

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<sup>151</sup>Allen, 65.

<sup>152</sup>Allen, 63.

<sup>153</sup>Richard A. Blake, *Woody Allen: Profane and Sacred* (London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1995), 71.

perfect analytic...kind of insight.” Annie corrects Alvy and says, “Your name was Alvy Singer...Because in the dream...I break Sinatra’s glasses.” Alvy realizes that her dreams insinuates that he is actually suffocating her. She continues speaking over Alvy’s realization and says, “She said that I should probably come five times a week. I don’t think I mind analysis at all. The only question is, Will it change my *wife*?” Alvy hears her slip-up. Annie says, “Then I told her about how I didn’t think you’d every really take me seriously, because you don’t think that I’m smart enough.”<sup>154</sup> Alvy’s attempt to make Annie over in his own image without making a commitment to her signifies him as a member of the “Me” Decade.<sup>155</sup>

Although Alvy’s relationship with Annie takes on a Pygmalion dynamic, their initial attraction stems from their differing backgrounds. Peter Cowie interprets Annie as an antidote to the structured artifice of Alvy’s New York existence. Her “air-headed out-of-town personality,” speaking with expressions like “la-di-da” and “neat” appear in stark contrast with Alvy’s “pencil-sharp, ineffably humourless sophistication” of his first two Manhattan wives.<sup>156</sup> Annie possesses many waspish traits and conveys a shiksa charm to Alvy. For example, she moves to New York from Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin and orders a pastrami sandwich on white bread with mayonnaise. Alvy attempts to change her personality throughout the course of the film and mold her into a woman more like those in his past. After they first meet, Annie describes Sylvia Plath’s poetry as “neat.” Alvy remarks, “I hate to tell yuh, this is nineteen

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<sup>154</sup>Allen, 63.

<sup>155</sup>Brode, 175.

<sup>156</sup>Cowie, 31.

seventy-five, you know that ‘neat’ went out, I would say, at the turn of the century.”<sup>157</sup> He buys her philosophic books, sends her to an analyst, and encourages her to take adult-education courses. “I think it’s a wonderful thing,” he says, “You meet wonderful, interesting professors.” Annie waits for Alvy backstage after he gives a performance at a college. She tells him, “You were so neat...And you know something? I think that I’m starting to get more of your references, too.”<sup>158</sup> Later in the film, Alvy spies on Annie and her professor, who she calls by his first name causing Alvy to say, “Adult education is such junk! The professors are so phony.”<sup>159</sup> Annie’s exposure to ideas different from her traditional upbringing increasingly moves her away from Alvy’s influence and affections.

*Annie Hall* reflects Lasch’s assessment of the culture’s typical narcissist as plagued by unappeasable desires. Alvy’s attempts to fix Annie signify projections of his personal struggles with himself. As she changes and becomes more like the ideals in which he steers her toward, new problems emerge to challenge his relationship with Annie. Therefore, Alvy is perpetually discontent. Likewise, Lasch argues that genuine fulfillment becomes impossible for narcissistic personalities to find. Instead of accepting their given circumstances, they waver between grandiose ideas of their own talents or condemn themselves to self hatred.<sup>160</sup> Alvy fits Lasch’s description in his inability to experience joy with Annie and his self-pity following their break-up. Subsequently, Lasch’s declaration that “People no longer dream of overcoming difficulties,

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<sup>157</sup>Allen, 37.

<sup>158</sup>Allen, 54.

<sup>159</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>160</sup>Clecak, 248-249.

but merely of surviving them,” not only fits Alvy Singer but also introduces survival as a prominent cultural theme of the 1970s.<sup>161</sup>

*Everything You Wanted to Know about Sex but Were Afraid to Ask* (1969), *Human Sexual Inadequacy* (1970), and *The Joy of Sex* (1972) represent America’s booming interest in topics of sexuality. Picking up where Alfred Kinsey left off, these highly popular studies reflect liberating attitudes on relations between men and women and gave rise to the decade’s “sexual revolution.” Annie’s forwardness with Alvy when they first meet symbolizes the period’s relaxation of traditional gender roles. Women felt freer to accept roles traditionally relegated for men, such as women asking men out on dates.<sup>162</sup> Diane Keaton’s personal contribution to the film, Annie’s outfits, baggy and sometimes androgenous appearance, also embodies the decade’s casual attitude to life and sexuality.<sup>163</sup> Commenting on *Annie Hall*’s cultural significance, Diane Keaton told reporters, “Some people have come up to me and said, there’s so much of what we feel in it. It’s about relationships now, and what it’s like for us. I mean, obviously, there’s been a change (in society at large). There’s many more people who are single and not actually ready to get married...Women who are 30 and not ready and not knowing if they want to get married and who are still finding out about themselves.”<sup>164</sup> Daniel Yankelovich’s assessment of changing cultural norms in the 1970s concludes it is becoming as “normal” to be unmarried as to

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<sup>161</sup>Clecak, 249.

<sup>162</sup>Slocum-Schaffer, 171.

<sup>163</sup>Cowie, 16.

<sup>164</sup>Brode, 173.

be married.<sup>165</sup>

Peter Carroll examines the deterioration of the nuclear family in his study on the 1970s. His interview with a psychiatrist shows, “couples living together (unmarried) are more likely to try and work out the differences between them.” Without the stability of law between them “there is a fear of losing each other.” Nevertheless, the age of no-fault divorces produced a California Supreme Court ruling in 1977 where an unwed couple with an implicit marriage contract did not lose their standing before the law. This case signifies that judges began placing contractual obligations above moral issues.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, *Annie Hall* contrasts the main characters’ living arrangements with glimpses of their parents’ lifestyles and traditional family structures to reflect cultural changes. Alvy and Annie represent examples of singles living in the culture of narcissism. In contrast, both of their families portray idyllic traits from relationships of the postwar generation.

Annie shows Alvy pictures of her family when they first meet. She tells him the tie she wears is a present from “Grammy Hall.” In disbelief, Alvy repeats, “Grammy Hall?” Annie laughs and says, “Yeah, my grammy.” Alvy returns, “What did you do, grow up in a Norman Rockwell painting?” Then he kids her and says, “Jesus, my grammy...n-never gave gifts, you know. She-she was too busy getting raped by Cossacks.”<sup>167</sup> Later, a scene compares their families using waspish and Jewish stereotypes.

Dinner at Annie’s home in Chippewa Falls shows her family sitting quietly around a

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<sup>165</sup>Yankelovich, 97.

<sup>166</sup>Carroll, 283.

<sup>167</sup>Allen, 37.

table and making conversation about hunting and Grammy's ham. Alvy says to the audience, "I can't believe this family. Annie's mother. She's really beautiful. And they're talkin' swap meets and boat basins, and the old lady at the end of the table is a classic Jew hater." Grammy Hall looks disgruntled at Alvy and pictures him in the appearance of a Hasidic Jew with a beard and Pais, the traditional curls in Jewish men's hair. Alvy observes they are nothing like his family and says, "the two are like oil and water." The screen splits in half and reveals Alvy's family busily eating at a crowded kitchen table. Alvy's family interrupt each other loudly, talking about various health concerns, and the two family's conversations overlap. Mom Hall asks Alvy's mother, "How do you spend the holiday, Mrs. Singer?" Alvy's father tells her they fast and explains to Annie's father, no food to atone for their sins. Mom Hall says, "What sins? I don't understand." Alvy's father replies, "Tell you the truth, neither do we?"<sup>168</sup> The scene expresses an old-fashioned sense of devotion to following traditions in spite of their absurdities.

Although each family differs in their customs, they both reinforce the changes between the 1970s and postwar decades. The "Me" generation placed less value on family because of choices favoring self-indulgent trends, whereas their parents' culture dictated a commitment to family life. Daniel Yankelovich compares couples of the postwar generation with baby boomers in terms of changes in a prevailing giving/getting compact. He paraphrases the term as doing what is expected instead of putting oneself first. In return, traditional minded citizens gained a sense of patriotism, pride in their families, and economic security.<sup>169</sup>

Rob reminds Alvy that his mother and father fought all the time. Alvy remembers,

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<sup>168</sup>Allen, 57.

<sup>169</sup>Yankelovich, 9.

“Yeah, and always over the most ridiculous things.” A flashback shows Alvy’s mother and father arguing over whether or not to fire the cleaning lady for stealing. Alvy’s father defends her and says, “She’s a colored woman, from Harlem! She has no money! She’s got a right to steal from us! After all, who is she gonna steal from if not us?”<sup>170</sup> The depiction of Alvy’s parents signifies that traditional marriages endured in spite of personal differences. A case study from Yankelovich’s work states a common view on marriage as, “Even though we no longer had anything in common we stayed together. We didn’t break up marriage even when the children were grown.”<sup>171</sup> Yankelovich argues the implicit contract of postwar period families lies at the heart of the American dream. He views the trend of self-fulfillment during the 1970s as modifying the giving/getting compact. Yankelovich presents cases in which psychological and economic consequences result from individuals’ search for self-fulfillment. Similarly, *Annie Hall* suggests a negative impact from the period’s trend of short-term coupling in contrast with traditional relationships.

A myriad of situations test the longevity of the characters’ relationship. Alvy thinks Annie seems “removed” and “sort of distant” while they make love unless she smokes marijuana. Alvy asks her, “You have to be artificially relaxed before we can go to bed?” Annie responds, “What’s the difference, anyway?” Then Alvy says, “I’ll give you a shot of sodium pentothal. You can sleep through it.”<sup>172</sup> A scene shows Annie’s “inner self,” a ghostlike spirit literally get out of bed as Alvy makes love to her body and observes the couple while sitting in a

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<sup>170</sup>Allen, 73.

<sup>171</sup>Yankelovich, 8.

<sup>172</sup>Allen, 50.



chair.<sup>173</sup> Tragically, *Annie Hall* is about the inevitability of its characters breaking up as the result of their individualistic impulses.

In addition to illustrating the period's cultural changes, *Annie Hall* contains an overriding sense of nostalgia. The film's therapeutic approach of reexamining its main characters' relationships mirrors a pervasive American sentiment of the period. Peter Clecak attributes the rise of selfishness and search for personal fulfillment as fitting into a nostalgic framework.<sup>174</sup> Nostalgia for simpler times, idealized by the nation's experiences following WWII, offers a sense of security from the present's crises and an uncertain future.<sup>175</sup> It befits the period's narcissism as well. Clecak argues that urges to reverse social processes through cultural longing or searching for one's roots epitomizes exercises of the selfishly absorbed.<sup>176</sup> Such views manifested throughout the decade in events like the Bicentennial Celebration and movies such as *American Graffiti* (1973). The planning of the Bicentennial Celebration in 1976 signified the nation's desire to return to a simpler time in the nation's history. "Happy Days" and "The Waltons," two popular television shows of the 1970s set in the 1950s and 1930s respectively, portray American families with limitless love and tolerance.<sup>177</sup> Christopher Capozzola argues that America's search for its roots in a rootless time of uncertainty symbolizes the culture's

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<sup>173</sup>Sam B. Girgus, *The Films of Woody Allen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 39.

<sup>174</sup>Clecak, 261.

<sup>175</sup>Ibid., 92.

<sup>176</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>177</sup>Slocum-Schaffer, 185.

narcissistic “search for self.”<sup>178</sup> Fantasies like *Star Wars* (1977) and *Superman* (1978) also appealed to mass audiences for the same reasons. Just as “Those Were the Days,” serves as the introductory theme song to the period’s highly popular show “All in the Family,” *Annie Hall* uses music to reinforce its nostalgia. Diane Keaton’s captivating rendition of the song, “Seems Like Old Times,” signifies American nostalgia during *Annie Hall*’s dramatic climax.

In the literary arena, Christopher Lasch’s iconoclastic work, *The Culture of Narcissism*, endures as social criticism of America in the 1970s. Lasch argues that the pursuit of happiness, one of the nation’s founding ideals, has transformed into a societal state of selfish preoccupation.<sup>179</sup> Woody Allen contributes as much diatribe on film with *Annie Hall* and illustrates the emptiness of the culture. His contrast of urban life between New York and Los Angeles presents humorous caricatures of the period’s self-absorbed condition.

*Annie Hall*’s characters engage in long conversations and personal reflections because Allen’s view of city life is very cerebral. He tells an interviewer, “This is what city life is...It’s verbal communication. You’re not up in the morning like the Tolstoy peasant cutting the hay.”<sup>180</sup> Unlike Scorsese’s portrait in *Taxi Driver*, Allen places New York very much on a cultural pedestal and holds it in high esteem. He enjoys its cosmopolitan qualities. He explains, “I like to be able to walk out of my house and have the whole city around me, pavement to walk

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<sup>178</sup>Christopher Capozzola, “It Makes You Want to Believe,” in *America in the 70s*, eds. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 38.

<sup>179</sup>Lasch, xv.

<sup>180</sup>Stig Bjorkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 79.

on and stores and places to go to.”<sup>181</sup> *Annie Hall* presents Rob, Alvy’s best friend played by Tony Roberts, as the epitome of the period’s vanity who continually tries to convince Alvy to move to California. While walking in New York, Rob says, “Let’s get the hell outta this crazy city...We move to sunny L.A. All the show business is out there, Max.” Alvy and Rob both call each other Max. Alvy says, “No, I cannot. You keep bringing it up, but I don’t wanna live in a city where the only cultural advantage is that you can make a right turn on a red light.”<sup>182</sup> Later in the film, Alvy interrupts Rob from a tryst with sixteen-year-old twins to bail him out of jail. Referring to New York’s cultural superiority to Los Angeles, Alvy tells Rob, “You’re an actor, Max. You should be doing Shakespeare in the Park.” Rob says, “I did Shakespeare in the Park, Max. I got mugged. I was playing Richard the Second and two guys with leather jackets stole my leotard.”<sup>183</sup> *Annie Hall* becomes Allen’s first opportunity to set a film in New York. His distaste for California stems from the city being so spread out where you need a car to go everywhere and his dislike for too much sunshine. He also considers the film industry’s mass marketing as responsible for producing too much “junk.”<sup>184</sup> Annie and Alvy visit Rob and during their trip to L.A. Annie comments to Alvy how clean L.A. appears in contrast to New York. Alvy explains that they take their garbage and make it into television shows. Rob defends L.A. and says, “Max, there’s no crime, there’s no mugging.” Alvy corrects him and refers to the Manson “family” murders, saying, “There’s no economic crime, you know, but there’s ritual,

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<sup>181</sup>Ibid, 90.

<sup>182</sup>Allen, 10.

<sup>183</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>184</sup>Bjorkman, 90.

religious-cult murders, you know, there's wheat-germ killers out here."<sup>185</sup> Allen scapegoats Los Angeles as representative of the period's narcissism and continually derides its cultural features and stereotypes.

Rob wants Alvy to see some of his TV show and takes them to a big Christmas party during their stay in Los Angeles. Alvy watches Rob as he orchestrates the addition of "canned" laughs to his sit-com. Alvy says, "Do you realize how immoral this all is?" Rob defends himself again saying, "Max, I've got a hit series," and adds that at least he does it in front of a live audience. Alvy says, "Nobody laughs at it 'cause your jokes aren't funny." Rob replies, "That's why this machine is dynamite."<sup>186</sup> Rob's actions reveal his priority of placing commercial aspects above his work's artistic content.

Before coming to L.A., a music producer named Tony Lacey, played by Paul Simon of Simon & Garfunkel, introduces himself to Annie after her performance of "Seems Like Old Times." Tony invites them for a drink, "not a big deal...just be very mellow." Alvy makes an excuse for not wanting to go and later tells Annie, "if I get too mellow, I-I ripen and then rot."<sup>187</sup> Tony tells Annie that they can get together if they come out to the Coast. It turns out that Rob takes Alvy and Annie to Tony Lacey's Christmas Party. His home in Beverly Hills presents viewers of *Annie Hall* to a variety of L.A. caricatures and some of the funnier jokes of the film.

While getting out of the car Alvy jokes, "Don't tell me we're gonna hafta walk from the

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<sup>185</sup>Allen, 84.

<sup>186</sup>Allen, 85.

<sup>187</sup>Allen, 79.

car to the house. Geez, my feet haven't touched pavement since I reached Los Angeles."<sup>188</sup>

Alvy's affinity for New York leaves him feeling uncomfortable in suburban areas. Inside, two men banter absurd notions about the importance of taking a meeting with a guy named Freddy. The first man says sadly, "All the good meetings are taken."<sup>189</sup> Later, the same man says, "Not only is he a great agent, but he really gives good meetings." Alvy expresses concern that Tony has a "thing" for Annie. Rob reassures Alvy that Tony has a girlfriend and points her out as "the one with the V.P.L.," which means visible panty line. Alvy says, "she's a ten...and that's great for you because you're used to twos." Rob claims, "There are no twos, Max." The girl approaches Rob and Alvy and she says, "You're Alvy Singer, right? Didn't we meet at est?" Alvy says no but adds, "I came out here to get some shock therapy, but there was an energy crisis." In each shot, Allen blatantly summarizes L.A. as a city obsessed by the entertainment industry and filled with shallow-minded people engaging the latest trends of self-fulfillment.

A conversation between Alvy and Tony presents another instance to contrast the cities that each character embodies. After professing the luxuriousness of his house, Tony says to Annie and Alvy condescendingly, "you're still New Yorkers." Alvy tells Tony he loves it there. Tony says, "I used to live there for years...but it's gotten...it's so dirty now," summoning images of the decaying city of *Taxi Driver* with his tone of voice. Annie agrees but Alvy admits sarcastically, "I'm into garbage. It's my thing," translating his position into a stereotypically "hip," California jargon. Annie notices a screening room and Tony adds, "there's another thing about New York. You wanna see a movie, you have to stand in a long line...It could be freezing,

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<sup>188</sup>Ibid., 88.

<sup>189</sup>Ibid., 88.

it could be raining.” Annie agrees with all of Tony’s points which signifies her removal from Alvy and her eventual decision to move to L.A. and live with Tony.

Tony tells Annie and Alvy they just watched *Grand Illusion* the other day. A man, stoned on a couch adds, “That’s a great film if you’re high.” Alvy looks at the man squarely and says, “I’m cool,” similar to how Travis tells Sport, “I’m hip,” in *Taxi Driver*. Interestingly, both films’ heroes expose their alienated isolation within their hostile environments in similar ways. Annie tries to convince Alvy how great L.A. seems in comparison to New York. Annie says, “It’s wonderful. I mean, you know they just watch movies all day.” Alvy discounts her saying, “Yeah, and gradually you get old an die. You know it’s important to make a little effort once in a while.” Lastly, they walk past a man speaking on a telephone, played by Jeff Goldblum, and the camera stops on him. The man, appearing concerned and confused, says into the phone, “Yeah, yeah. I forgot my mantra.”<sup>190</sup> Allen’s final ribbing of California with Jeff Goldblum’s line affirms his exaggerated criticism of the culture’s overriding self-centeredness.

A *Time* cover story in 1969 foreshadowed America’s next decade of hedonism and supports Allen’s interpretation of California in *Annie Hall*. The article opens, “As most of them (Californians) see it, the good, the godless, gregarious pursuit of pleasure is what California is all about.”<sup>191</sup> Daniel Bell’s assesses the 1970s by emphasizing fun morality displacing “goodness morality.” Whereas the nation’s Puritan founders traditionally associated guilt with gratifying forbidden impulses, Bell stresses that contemporary society promotes the belief that a

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<sup>190</sup>Allen, 92.

<sup>191</sup>*Time*, November 7, 1969, p. 60, quoted in Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976), 70-71.

failure to have fun produces problems with a person's self-esteem.<sup>192</sup> Alvy Singer typifies Bell's argument in his fish-out-of-water experiences in California. Consequently, one of Allen's own inner struggles reflects such sentiments and almost became the original title for *Annie Hall*.

Woody Allen read that his film won several major awards the night after the 1978 Academy Awards. He did not attend the ceremonies because of his regular engagement at Michael's Pub playing his clarinet. Allen later told reporters, "I was very surprised...But I'm anhedonic."<sup>193</sup> *Anhedonia*, Allen's first choice for the film's title, refers to the psychological condition of acute melancholia or the inability to enjoy oneself.<sup>194</sup> In the film, Annie tells Alvy, "You know I think that if you let me, maybe I could help you have more fun, you know? I mean, I know it's hard."<sup>195</sup> Tragically, Alvy's anhedonia dooms his relationship with Annie. When Annie wants a commitment, Alvy fears it and becomes miserable. However, once Annie moves on, Alvy wants her back and even proposes marriage. Ultimately, Alvy learns that emptiness results without a commitment from the right person.<sup>196</sup> Changing the title became a marketing issue. Producers took Diane Keaton's original name, her character's name in the film, and allow it to emphasize the film's romantic story rather than Allen's characterization of himself through Alvy.

Prior to *Annie Hall*, Allen's career consisted of writing other comedian's jokes,

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<sup>192</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>193</sup>Brode, 168.

<sup>194</sup>Ibid., 168.

<sup>195</sup>Allen, 71.

<sup>196</sup>Brode, 175.

eventually performing his own in front of live audiences, and writing short stories. His transition to the movies produced eleven film credits in which he wrote, directed, and acted in many of his own works by 1975. His films such as *Bananas* (1971) and *Sleeper* (1973) present Allen's on-screen personas as lovable, yet neurotic, self-deprecating, losers. He structured these stories around his jokes. However, with *Annie Hall* and afterward, he begins to do the opposite, giving his narratives the priority over his comedy. Thus, his work begins to transcend the limitations of a commercial comedy as he explores more dramatic and personal themes in his films. Allen's combination of laughter, emotion, and thought culminates in *Annie Hall*.<sup>197</sup> It won various awards from critic societies, the Directors Guild, the British Academy, and the Golden Globes. *Annie Hall* won Oscars for Best Picture, Best Actress (Diane Keaton), Best Original Screenplay (Allen and Brickman), and Best Director (Allen).<sup>198</sup> Subsequently, it became the first comedy since *The Apartment* in 1960 to win the Oscar for Best Picture.

One of the funniest scenes in *Annie Hall* presents Alvy, Annie, and another couple casually preparing lines of cocaine. Annie teases Alvy's reluctance to try anything new. Alvy says, "I'm sure it's a lot of fun, 'cause the Incas did it, you know, and they were a million laughs." Alvy asks his friend, "How much is this stuff?" His friend replies, "It's about two thousand dollars an ounce." Alvy puts his finger into the cocaine, smells it and then sneezes. The powder blows all over the room as the others quietly react.<sup>199</sup> Alvy's ineptness with

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<sup>197</sup>Maurice Yacowar, *Loser Take All* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1979), 169-170.

<sup>198</sup>Brode, 168.

<sup>199</sup>Allen, 83.



recreational drugs reveals his failure to conform with features of the culture of narcissism. However, the scene also signifies part of Allen's cultural attack. Although critics assume Allen's own experiences make him more of a celebrant of the period than a critic, he confesses his artistic motives originate from personal shortcomings. Allen told a reporter in *Time*, "I try to pay attention to the moral side of issues as they arise and try not to make a wrong choice...I don't think it's right to try to buy your way out of life's painful side by using drugs. I'm also against the concept of short marriages, and regard my own marriages as a sign of failure." Thus, *Annie Hall* shares a similar significance to *The Great Gatsby*. Both Allen and Fitzgerald not only lived during and loved the respective periods they wrote about but function as the harshest critics of each.<sup>200</sup> *Annie Hall* not only encapsulates American culture of the 1970s. It warns viewers about the dangers of living in the culture of narcissism, has personal origins, and redefined the scope of Woody Allen's career.

Besides channeling his anhedonia into Alvy Singer, Allen wrote the screenplay for *Annie Hall*, therapeutically, to relieve his gloom from the end of his real life relationship with Diane Keaton. Just like the film's characters, he resented her therapist and teacher and she disliked his condescension and depressive moods.<sup>201</sup> They remained friends but Allen continued to look back on their romance nostalgically and missed her very much. Thus, he and his friend Marshall Brickman began writing *Annie Hall*, letting art imitate life. Allen said, "It was a picture about me...My life, my thoughts, my ideas, my background." Although he disliked using autobiographic material, he hoped that taking the risk of trying something different would make

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<sup>200</sup>Brode, 23.

<sup>201</sup>Marion Meade, *The Unruly Life of Woody Allen* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 107-108.

people take him seriously.<sup>202</sup> The film's production began in the spring of 1976 on a budget of 3 million dollars and opened on April 27, 1977. Audiences interpreted *Annie Hall* as a romance capturing the way they lived and symbolic of what people were going through during the "Me" Decade.<sup>203</sup> In its first year, *Annie Hall* grossed 25 million dollars. Diane Jacobs argues, "Social as well as artistic factors contributes to its immediate success."<sup>204</sup> It grossed 100 million dollars worldwide over the next decade and remains a celluloid document of American culture during the 1970s.

Just as Martin Scorsese establishes with *Taxi Driver* an alternative source of box office revenue to traditional Hollywood epics, Woody Allen's personal style and the success of *Annie Hall* earn him recognition and the ability to continue making films of a new style during the 1970s that criticize hallmarks of American life. Hollywood's decline in moviegoers from television's competition culminated with a financial crisis between 1969-1971. The industry's economic condition caused them to focus on more cost-effective investments. Big budgeted flops of the 1960s like *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) convinced major studios to support films on smaller scales and artists from the film school generation that were creating more personal narratives. Classical epics and elaborate musicals of the 1950s and 1960s increasingly became box office poison. Films began to reflect issues underlying American society. Topics of criticism included depictions of violence, sexual taboos, nostalgia, and the influence of the media. Thus, intelligent, affordable, and commercially successful films like *Bonnie and Clyde*

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<sup>202</sup>Ibid, 108.

<sup>203</sup>Brode, 171.

<sup>204</sup>Brode, 171.

(1967) and *The Graduate* (1967) set the trend for the early 1970s. Studio heads like Daniel Melnick at MGM produced hits like *The Sunshine Boys* (1975) and *Network* (1976) using economic constraint and artistic wit.<sup>205</sup> *Annie Hall* represents a peak in cinematic art during the latter half of the 1970s.

Woody Allen emerged as an American auteur in the 1970s with the release of *Annie Hall*. His films no longer recycled the humor of his comedic influences like Chaplin and the Marx Brothers but possessed a personal Allen signature. His work reflected American life through a neurotic, New York intellectual lens. Commenting on his next project to follow *Annie Hall*, Allen described its main theme as, “The inability to function in contemporary society,” which really reflects his entire career’s contribution to cultural history.<sup>206</sup> Films echoing cultural themes persisted as well in spite of changing directions in the film industry during the 1970s due to a shift in popular audiences’ tastes. Although personal films helped to revive a struggling market, ironically, their preeminence would be overtaken by the end of the decade. Thus, the period’s most popular films began placing more value on a film’s marketability than on their social commentary.

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<sup>205</sup>Cook, 303-304.

<sup>206</sup>Kroll, 71.

## CHAPTER 3

### *SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER*: SURVIVAL IN AN AGE OF LIMITS, THE NEW NARCISSIST, AND THE ADVENT OF BLOCKBUSTER CINEMA

Christopher Lasch used the phrase, *American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* as the subtitle for his work, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979). Next to crisis, disillusionment, and self-fulfillment; the most frequently used label in reference to the 1970s is most definitely “limits.” Thus, economic and political limitations spawned the decade’s cultural responses. Lasch’s words suggested a nation characterized by shortcomings. As public crises escalated, individuals increasingly began to focus more on their private lives. Americans searched for ways not only to enjoy and find meaning in their personal lives but ways to survive the decade.

Aware of these sentiments, a revived film industry underwent a Renaissance from a wave of successful, small-scale productions in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Thereafter, producers increasingly began to focus on a new formula to attract larger audiences. The advent of Hollywood Blockbusters echoed an optimistic turning point in the country’s period of adjustment and transition by the second half of the decade. Hope for a brighter future began to displace nostalgic sentiments. One film in particular provided an escape from the doldrums of everyday life in the late 1970s.

*Saturday Night Fever* (1977) begins to the pulsating beat of The Bee Gee’s classic song “Staying Alive.” The song’s lyrics provide an anthem for the film’s main character, Tony Manero, a nineteen-year-old disco king from Brooklyn, played by John Travolta. His character’s depth ranges between bouts of rage and anger to sensitive vulnerability and ambition. In addition, Tony displays a foulmouthed, racist, and sexist personality in some instances but he is

humorous and charming in others. Although Tony eventually realizes the limits of his personal shortcomings, his dark characterization constructs an authentically rich urban hero. Likewise, *Saturday Night Fever's* overall tone varies between disturbing imagery and content to uplifting and light-hearted moments. The film's music also plays a vital role in communicating Tony's attitudes and feelings throughout *Saturday Night Fever*. The entire soundtrack, especially the songs written and performed by the Bee Gees, reinforce the narrative's culturally relevant themes and are as vital as the film's dialogue.

Although *Saturday Night Fever* illustrated the harsh conditions of urban America, the film's essence appealed to audiences' desires to leave the bad memories of the 1970s behind them and move forward to a better time. The film's enormous success in the youth market overshadowed its social commentary upon its release. Millions of Americans flocked to see the film because it was more like going to a concert than watching a movie about the realities of life in Brooklyn. Therefore, the film's blockbuster status reflected a changing trend in cinema by the late 1970s. *Saturday Night Fever* represented a hybrid of two popular waves of 1970s films. The film's ability to produce large revenues signaled Hollywood studios to apply its marketable qualities in future projects and helped to change the course of film history. Additionally, *Saturday Night Fever* illustrates the theme of survival in America's age of limits and the hedonistic features of its culture's narcissism. Consequently, *Saturday Night Fever* is culturally indicative of the decade's search for self-fulfillment.

The first scene of the film follows its main character, Tony, strutting down the street confidently in sync with the beat of "Staying Alive." Barry, Robin, and Maurice Gibb comprise the Bee Gees and they sing the first two stanzas together. Their music and lyrics reflect his

spirited personality when they sing:

Well, you can tell by the way I use my walk  
I'm a woman's man: no time to talk  
Music loud and women warn, I've kicked around  
Since I was born  
And now it's all right, it's okay  
And you may look the other way  
We can try to understand  
The *New York Time's* effect on man

Whether you're a brother or whether you're a mother  
You're stayin' alive, stayin' alive  
Feel the city breakin' and everybody shaking  
And we're stayin' alive, stayin' alive.<sup>207</sup>

“Staying Alive” served as Tony’s theme but it also reinforced the national mood. Its dichotomy conveyed a sense of people’s discouragement but also emphasized their persistent struggle to overcome the decade’s difficulties. Like the song states, the “city’s breakin’” but “everybody’s shakin’ and the chorus emphasizes that people are “stayin’ alive.” Although a timeless song itself, *Saturday Night Fever’s* theme of survival mirrored sentiments from other popular sources of American culture in the 1970s.

Americans made Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) the best-selling book of the 1970s. His vision of the end of the world sold over thirty million copies. Lindsey’s book represented a literary interpretation of biblical prophecies. His version of the apocalypse offered the comfort of certainty to readers living in a period characterized by chaos.<sup>208</sup> Orson Welles narrated an adaptation of Lindsey’s book for a documentary in 1976. Welles and Lindsey

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<sup>207</sup>Barry, Robin, and Maurice Gibb, “Stayin’ Alive,” *Saturday Night Fever Soundtrack* (Hollywood: Robert Stigwood Organisation, 1977).

<sup>208</sup>Beth Bailey and David Farber, *America in the 70s* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 1.

discuss various prophecies and relate them to contemporary America.<sup>209</sup> Popular films emphasized similar themes and allowed audiences to identify with characters confronted by disastrous scenarios. William Graebner argues in his essay, “America’s Poseidon Adventure,” that stories reflecting a siege mentality became Hollywood staples as a reaction to the decade’s existential despair. Graebner writes, “Time and again, Americans lamented the decline of heroism and the heroic, defining themselves instead as survivors.” Films projected scenarios of survival in Vietnam, sinking ships, burning buildings, and shark attacks. Each variation mirrored the same social impetus.<sup>210</sup> Graebner suggests that *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), one of the first “disaster” films of the 1970s reflects the same social concerns of Carter’s “crisis of confidence” speech at the end of the decade.<sup>211</sup> Graebner argues that the idea of survival became a prominent cultural concept because it defined the period’s constant sense of impending doom from a series of disastrous events.<sup>212</sup> Thus, films such as *The Towering Inferno* (1974), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Jaws* (1975), and *The Deer Hunter* (1978) emerged as products of the decade.

Christopher Lasch emphasized the decade’s theme of survival in *The Minimal Self* (1984). Lasch criticizes the taking of Holocaust survival experiences and relating them to America’s social crises of the 1970s. For example, Lina Wertmuller’s film, *Seven Beauties*

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<sup>209</sup>IGN Entertainment, “Late, Great Planet Earth,” 1976, <[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/late\\_great\\_planet\\_earth/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/late_great_planet_earth/)> (1998).

<sup>210</sup>William Graebner, “America’s Poseidon Adventure,” in *America in the 70s*, eds. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 158.

<sup>211</sup>Graebner, 159.

<sup>212</sup>Graebner, 168.

(1976), a concentration camp narrative, allowed audiences to identify with their own feelings of helplessness. Americans, according to Lasch, related current events like the energy crisis too frivolously to the Holocaust.<sup>213</sup> Lasch argued that a better metaphor for evaluating American problems might have offered citizens a better understanding of the period's politics.

Nevertheless, popular culture echoed sentiments of survival. Similar to the cultural sentiments of "Staying Alive," Gloria Gaynor also encapsulated the mood of the decade with her song, "I Will Survive" (1979). The song's lyrics expressed the artist's response to living alone without her companion. Gaynor's song possesses a spirit of personal recovery and triumph over one's difficulties. However, audiences attached cultural meaning to it because it provided an anthem for the time. The same tendency was true in film's of the 1970s and especially with *Saturday Night Fever* because of various sources of social upheaval.

Besides a growing tradition of narratives associated with the Holocaust's legacy, such as *Marathon Man* (1976) and *The Boys from Brazil* (1978), other trends were culpable for instilling themes of survival in America during the 1970s. A growing awareness of environmental issues created alarming realizations. President Nixon said, "The 1970s absolutely must be the years when America pays its debt to the past by reclaiming the purity of ...our environment. It is literally now or never."<sup>214</sup> The fact that natural resources were finite and out of America's complete control revealed some of the consequences from the postwar decades. America consumed forty percent of the world's reserves of nonrenewable resources like fossil fuels after

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<sup>213</sup>Graebner, 169.

<sup>214</sup>James Trager, *The People's Chronology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1992), 1030 quoted in Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 132.



WWII. President Nixon assured citizens its appetite indicated a “badge of greatness.” He eventually passed a series of legislative measures to protect the environment. Nevertheless, OPEC raised oil prices fivefold, inflation caused shopping for groceries to increase sixty percent in five years, and lines at gas stations raised a new consciousness of scarcity in American minds.<sup>215</sup>

The period’s economic forces created an overriding sense of disenchantment and futility in America’s public sphere. Additionally, political events also contributed to America’s subsequent cultural reaction of retreating to more personal preoccupations. The prominence of social justice movements, characteristic of the 1960s, dissipated throughout the 1970s as Americans became more concerned with identity politics than the greater good. Ironically, the mafia benefitted from the period’s splintering of the Civil Rights Era into more personal associations. Joe Colombo, a prominent gangster, organized the Italian-American Civil Rights League in 1970. His group protected Americans of Italian descent from harassment from the Justice Department.<sup>216</sup> Even America’s criminal institutions seemed upside down.

Watergate’s legacy left an indelible impression on Americans. Nixon’s abuse of the executive branch marred his presidential successors. Both Ford and Carter led severely ineffective administrations over a growing distrust of government felt by many citizens. Carter’s famous speech describing the country’s crisis of confidence identified the decade’s reaction to the social turmoil and uncertainty. He said the “growing doubt about the meaning of our own

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<sup>215</sup>Richard Barnett, *The Lean Years: Politics in the Age of Scarcity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 16.

<sup>216</sup>Robert Hargreaves, *Superpower: A Portrait of America in the 1970s* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973), 583.

lives” rest at the core of the nation’s crisis. He viewed a majority of the country feeling empty and without purpose. Carter argued that Americans were yielding to “self-indulgence,” increasingly “longing for meaning,” and finding their identity through consumption.<sup>217</sup> Initially, Tony Manero epitomized the nation’s rise in shallowness. He revels in being the center of attention and fixates on his physical appearance. However, Tony’s preoccupation with his image changes as he matures in the film. Overall, his story presents his desire to begin a new life away from his neighborhood in Brooklyn. His actions signify his own version of survival and reveals the cultural limits of Americans in search for self-fulfillment in the 1970s.

Before “Staying Alive” begins to play, the first shot of *Saturday Night Fever* presents an aerial view of the Verrazano Bridge, which connects Brooklyn and Manhattan. The camera pans across the bridge and heads toward Brooklyn, the story’s principal setting. The bridge also establishes one of the film’s themes that relates to survival. Several characters, including Tony struggle to find their identity throughout the film. Crossing the bridge to Manhattan symbolizes leaving their past behind them and embarking upon a new life. Manhattan also represents the city’s sophistication in contrast to the working class ideals and accents of Brooklyn.

Tony lives in Bay Ridge, a section of Brooklyn, with his family. The film’s screenwriter, Norman Wexler and director, John Badham focused on the family’s Italian and Catholic customs. Almost every shot of the family presents them together at their dinner table. Their conversations either turn into arguments or mention their son, Frank, a priest in the Catholic church. Frank’s position represents the pinnacle of achievement for a Catholic family. Regarding his family’s faith, Tony cynically says to his friend Gus, “They think raising a priest

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<sup>217</sup>Quoted in Graebner, 158.

will earn them points in heaven or something.”<sup>218</sup> In contrast, Tony’s indulgent night life brings his family a sense of shame from his perspective. His mother says, “You should’ve been a priest like your brother...then you don’t have to worry about being late (for dinner).”<sup>219</sup> Tony’s day job does not bring him any real hope for long term fulfillment either. Instead, he escapes the week’s drudgery by daydreaming about his night life and ways to use his dancing talent to his advantage.

“Staying Alive” plays over the duration of time it takes Tony to return to his job carrying a can of paint. Fresh out of high school, Tony works full time at a hardware store for a man named Mr. Fusso. Viewers learn that Tony had left the store on an errand to pick up some paint at another store while an unhappy customer waits for him to return. The older woman, kept waiting by Tony’s strutting, appears visibly irritated. However, Tony makes quick work of her impatience by offering her a dollar off the paint. Although he takes too long to run a simple errand and angers both a customer and his boss, the scene signifies that Tony’s charm works to his advantage in ordinary circumstances.

Before Tony leaves work that day, he asks Mr. Fusso for an advance on his pay check so that he can purchase a shirt to wear that Friday night when he goes out. Mr. Fusso refuses and explains that paying him on Monday saves him from spending it over the weekend. Then he lectures Tony, telling him that he should save his money and plan for his future. Tony emphatically replies, “Fuck the future!” Mr. Fusso continues, “Tony, you can’t fuck the future,

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<sup>218</sup>*Saturday Night Fever*, DVD, prod. Robert Stigwood, dir. John Badham, 1 hr. 58 min. (1977; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2002).

<sup>219</sup>Norman Wexler, *Saturday Night Fever*, adapted from Nik Cohn, “Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night” (Paramount Pictures, 1977).

the future fucks you...It catches up with you and it fucks you, if you ain't planning for it."<sup>220</sup> His conversation with Mr. Fusso introduces the future as a recurring topic in Tony's life.

Later that weekend, Sunday afternoon, Tony hangs out with his friends and the same subject comes up again from their perspective. Joey asks, "Did ya see how much money the Knicks are gonna pay Frazier?" Bobby C. replies pessimistically, "We're never gonna make that much money in our whole life." Later, Joey looks at a Mercedes and says, "I'm gonna get myself one of these, you know?" Bobby C. discounts him again by saying, "You never gonna get yourself one of these...these things cost too much money." Fed up, Joey confronts Bobby C. and says, "You know, I've had you up to here...That's your favorite speech." Joey tells them about a guy he knows that has a Mercedes and a Cadillac. As Joey says, "It's a dog eat dog world...Everybody's out for what they can get," the camera zooms in on Tony's expression. A close-up reveals his disillusionment with his friend's unrealistic attitude and his discontentment with his present circumstances. The scene cuts to them riding home and the camera zooms in again on Tony's face, still with the same expression. Joey says, "It's every man for himself." Bobby says, "It's a stinkin' rat race." Each shot reveals the future as more of a concern in Tony's mind than he lead Mr. Fusso to believe. Tony continues to reflect on his situation as the scene dissolves, which reveals the end of the weekend, and shows him back at work, Monday morning.

Ethnic, blue-collar Americans experienced stunning setbacks during the 1970s. The working class enabled the nation to become a global industrial power beginning at the turn of the century and lasted through the postwar period of affluence. However, waves of recession,

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<sup>220</sup>Wexler (1977).

inflation, and unemployment wreaked havoc on workers' pride as they witnessed a period marked by deindustrialization. For instance, the steel industry in Ohio and Pennsylvania cut employment throughout the 1970s. A famous closure occurred at the Campbell Works of Youngstown Sheet on September 19, 1977. The trend continued into the early 1980s. A journalist described "the dead steel mills...as pathetic mausoleums to the decline of American industrial might that was once the envy of the world."<sup>221</sup> Jefferson Cowie argues that it was responsible for "creating Depression-like conditions in communities that once appeared to be incontrovertible proof of a stable and affluent working class."<sup>222</sup> Although Tony lives in a more metropolitan area of the country than America's steel towns, the shifts occurring in blue collar conditions throughout the nation's rust belt are evident in *Saturday Night Fever*.

Another aspect of the decade's economic constraints on the working class pertained to ideas about a person's identity in relation to their job. Traditionally, Americans linked their identities to their occupations. However, a heightened sense of drudgery in daily work added to an already high level of workers' frustrations. A growing rate of industrial accidents led to the creation of the Occupational Safety and Health Act in 1970. However, it was not adequately enforced.<sup>223</sup> Adding to their hazardous plight, working class Americans experienced an increase in feelings of meaninglessness from their work. The postwar generation's resistance to

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<sup>221</sup>Jefferson Cowie, "The Crosscurrents of Working-Class America in the 1970s," in *America in the 70s*, eds. Beth Baily and David Farber (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 96.

<sup>222</sup>Cowie, 96.

<sup>223</sup>Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), 65.

industrial life originated from higher standards of living. Consequently, the nation's age of affluence provided an atmosphere in which workers began to demand more from their jobs than just "bread and butter."<sup>224</sup>

To make matters worse, the country's leaders provided their citizens hollow promises about the values of self-improvement such as Vice President Agnew's vague statement that "Work will always be rewarded." Peter Carroll argues that the realities of American life in the 1970s prohibited such idealized visions of a mobile society.<sup>225</sup> A study by Daniel Yankelovich found that even college students' attitudes reflected a substantial change in work ethics. Yankelovich's evidence shows that 72 percent of college students subscribed to the view that "hard work pays off" in the 1960s. That percentage was reduced to 40 percent by the early 1970s.<sup>226</sup> This trend was consistent among all Americans. The view that "hard work pays off" existed in only a minority of Americans by the end of the 1970s. Thus, shifts occurred in which traditional modes of social mobility were replaced by searching for self-fulfillment as the result of the era's industrial limits. Moreover, Jefferson Cowie asserts that *Saturday Night Fever* "invites audiences" to consider workers as a fixture of the past.<sup>227</sup> The film celebrates the idea that Tony can fulfill his self-indulgent dreams only if he abandons his working class life in Brooklyn.

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<sup>224</sup>Carroll, 66.

<sup>225</sup>Carroll. 64.

<sup>226</sup>Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981), 38.

<sup>227</sup>Cowie, 94-95.

Although Tony's job is not industrial, scenes at the hardware store signify the dissatisfaction of workers during the 1970s. John Badham, the film's director commented that these scenes illustrate Tony's growing awareness that he might be stuck in the same job for the rest of his life. Monday afternoon, Mr. Fusso tells Tony that he gave him a raise. He does this to insure Tony's loyalty and remove any of his ideas of quitting for a better opportunity. Noticing Tony's excitement, Mr. Fusso says, "You'd better look first." Tony says, "It don't make no difference, the important thing is you gave me a raise...I think that's really great." Mr. Fusso senses an opportunity to further placate Tony's youthful ambitions. He bumps Tony's raise up from \$2.50 to an even \$4.00 and remarks, "I've never seen anybody so shit-ass, happy over a crummy \$2.50 raise!" Later that night at dinner, Tony tells his father about his raise. Tony's father says, "Do you know what four dollars buys today? It don't even buy three dollars." Tony replies, "I don't see anybody giving you a raise down at unemployment." The 1970s witnessed a surge in global levels of unemployment and the United States government even subsidized Americans not wanting to reenter the work force. Americans who collected welfare and unemployment insurance cost taxpayers \$4.5 billion in 1973.<sup>228</sup> Tony's father appears sedentary at his home for the entire film. Originally, the story included Tony's father receiving a telegram that notified him of his return to work but the scene was cut from the film. His character illustrates the social forces working against the working class and the limited chances of his son becoming a success. *Saturday Night Fever* follows Tony as he realizes there is more to life than working in a paint store.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>228</sup>Barnet, 275-277.

<sup>229</sup>Wexler (1977).

Later in the film, Mr. Fusso fires Tony after they have an argument about taking a day off. When Tony comes back to the store to pick up his last pay check, Mr. Fusso gives him his job back. He tells Tony, "I don't wanna lose you...You're a good kid...Customers like you...I want you to stay." Tony says, "You mean I ain't fired." Mr. Fusso tells him, "You gotta a future here...Look at Harold. He's been with me eighteen years since I opened...and Mike, fifteen years." Tony feels relief as he goes back to work but he notices the older employees and especially Mike, who shows signs of back pain. Back to the scene when he tells his father about his raise, Tony's plight becomes clear. He says, "This raise means I'm good...Do you how many times I've been told that I was good? Twice...two fucking times...This raise today and dancing at the disco." Tony escapes his everyday existence at night. Dancing at his local disco, the 2001 Odyssey, offers Tony more than just an outlet for his daily frustrations, and becomes a showcase for his true talents, a way out of his working class life, and the source of his personal fulfillment.

Tony's after hour activities reveal more about his character's survival instincts. Although he displays characteristics of a fun loving youth, Tony takes his dancing very seriously. On their way to the club, Tony's friends list their assortment of mood altering chemicals. Tony demands, "Nobody drops nothing until I say so!" They question his seriousness and he explains that he has his reasons. At the club, Tony returns to their table after dancing and Bobby C. compliments his moves. Tony assures him that he can be as good if he practices. Then Bobby C. offers everyone some speed. Tony asks, "Why can't you guys get off from dancing?" Back on the dance floor, a Latin rhythm begins. Tony voices his disgust and says, "I can't dance to this shit!" He confronts Monty, the club's disc jockey, and asks him, "What are you playin' this shit for?" Monty defends himself by pointing to the dance floor and says, "Look, she's



groovin’.”<sup>230</sup> Tony spots a nicely dressed young woman whose dancing impresses him. Tony’s respect for quality dancing transcends his neighborhood prejudices instantly as he watches Stephanie.

“Staying Alive,” includes the lyrics, “Life goin’ nowhere...Somebody help me.” Stephanie fulfills this role for Tony when she agrees to become his dance partner. She also becomes his friend in the process. Stephanie confronts Tony with the limitations of his life in Brooklyn while flaunting a phony image of herself. She constantly pretends to lead a more sophisticated lifestyle than Tony because of her experiences working in Manhattan. Tony asks Stephanie out for a cup of coffee after they first meet. Their conversation reveals their divergent attitudes and approaches to life.

As they sit down, Stephanie tells Tony that she started drinking tea with lemon recently because its more refined than coffee. She tries to impress Tony with her knowledge of the latest cultural trends. She tells him that everything across the river is better than in Brooklyn. She tells Tony, “I’m tired of this whole Bay Ridge scene.” Tony tries to match wits with her but she sees through his attempts. He tells the waiter, “She’d like some lemon with some tea in it.” Stephanie talks incessantly about Eric Clapton, Laurence Olivier, and other celebrities coming into her work. Tony says, “Oh...far out!” She quizzes him as to whether he knows who those people are and then asks why did he say “far out” since he did not. Stephanie’s act reduces Tony’s confidence and charm to a bumbling and timid personality.

The audience sees through Stephanie’s act as she humbles Tony. She mispronounces “vivacious,” placing a soft vowel sound over the “a” and “i.” When they discuss *Romeo and*

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<sup>230</sup>Wexler (1977).

*Juliet*, Tony makes a valid point about Romeo taking the poison too soon. Stephanie replies, “That’s how they took the poison back then.” She tells him that she is sick of guys like Tony who “don’t have their shit together.” Stephanie tries to get him to understand that she is changing and growing as a person by working in Manhattan. Like Diane Keaton’s character in *Annie Hall*, Stephanie takes a class to better herself. She says, “Nobody has any idea how much I’m growing.” Tony replies, “Then why don’t you go on a diet.” His goofy sarcasm recalls Travolta’s former “sweat hog” persona from television’s “Welcome Back, Kotter.” Fed up with trying to relate with him, Stephanie accuses Tony of not being able to handle anything completely different. Tony interprets “different” as meaning “better” and gets tired of Stephanie’s attitude of superiority.

Stephanie says, “You’re a cliché, goin’ nowhere, on you way to no place.” Tony asks, “What...you have a stairway to the stars or something?” Stephanie asks him if he ever even thought about going to college. Tony replies, “Did you? Then why the fuck are you bugging me about it?”<sup>231</sup> Although Stephanie’s insults anger Tony, he begins to see through her charade but knows that she is right. He calms down and admits to her how dancing makes him feel. Tony tells her that dancing gives him a real “high” and he wants to get the same feeling somewhere else in his life. He admits, “Dancing can’t last forever.” The scene reveals Tony’s aspirations and his characters’ depth of which later disco films do not possess. Films like *Thank God It’s Friday* (1978) present caricatures of people from the 1970s. *Saturday Night Fever*’s main characters illustrate personal ambitions, pretensions, and what life is like when a person is trying

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<sup>231</sup>Wexler (1977).

to get started in the world.<sup>232</sup> Moreover, it illustrates Americans' strong impulses of pursuing personal interests along with their careers in the 1970s.<sup>233</sup>

A conflict occurs in Tony's family when Frank, the priest, decides to leave the church. Before they learn of his decision, Tony's mother displays her devotion to Frank's endeavor. She asks Tony to walk her to church after dinner. He asks her why since she was already there that afternoon. She explains that she wants to pray that Father Frank calls her. Tony says, "You're turning God into a telephone operator." Frank leaves the church and stays at home for a couple nights. His mother reacts by saying, "Dear lord, what will I tell Theresa and Marie?" His family's negative reaction to his decision signifies their fear of losing a connection with God. Scholars have noted that defections in the Roman Catholic Church reached a critical point in the 1970s. The loosening of Church doctrine in the late Sixties while still refusing to alter positions on birth control influenced an increase in American apostasies.<sup>234</sup>

Frank spends time with Tony before he moves out. Tony asks him what caused him to quit. Frank says, "One day you see a man on a crucifix...but its only a backdrop to something else...their fantasies, their images of me as a priest was the only belief that I had." One night, Tony takes his brother out to the disco with his friends. Frank watches Tony dance and notices his talent. Frank says, "You're dancing is really marvelous, it's exciting...They can't keep their eyes off of you." Unfortunately, Bobby C. changes Frank's good mood. Bobby C. asks him if the pope might grant special dispensation if he has his girlfriend get an abortion. Frank tells

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<sup>232</sup>Wexler (1977).

<sup>233</sup>Yankelovich, 156.

<sup>234</sup>Carroll, 247.

Bobby C., “I don’t think so,” and feels sorry for him. Frank’s solemn expression signifies his further frustrations with the church. Although his parents’ pressure instills Frank with a fleeting sense of faith, it equips him with good advice for Tony. As he packs up a car, he tells Tony, “Ex-priests don’t stay at home.” Then Frank asks him, “Are you going to do something with your dancing? The only way you’re going to survive is to do what you think is right. If you listen to them, then you’re going to end up miserable.” Tony knows his brother is right but he remains fearful of doing anything about it.

One of the film’s most memorable scenes expresses sentiments of both survival and the period’s narcissism. Tony walks back into the club after a trip outside during the first disco scene of the film. The Bee Gees song, “Night Fever,” begins as he strolls onto the dance floor. He starts dancing with two different girls slowly and kisses one who thinks Tony is Al Pacino. Their dancing spreads into a small line dance and quickly takes over the entire floor as everyone dances to the same rhythm and beat in unison. The Bee Gees sing the verse of “Night Fever:”

Here I am  
Prayin’ for this moment to last  
Livin’ on the music so fine  
Borne on the wind  
Makin’ it mine<sup>235</sup>

As the song continues, a fog emerges from the floor and creeps through the dancers. The scene appears like a dream sequence until the end of the song as it fades into the next morning. “Night Fever” enhances the characters’ feelings of joy. The scene’s synchronization between the dancers and music suggests that they personalize their experience and allow the moment to free

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<sup>235</sup>Barry, Robin, and Maurice Gibb, “Night Fever,” *Saturday Night Fever Soundtrack* (Hollywood: Robert Stigwood Organisation, 1977).

themselves from worldly clamors. Consequently, Gene Siskel considered this dance sequence part of the reason why *Saturday Night Fever* was his favorite film of all time. Roger Ebert explains his partner's affinity for *Saturday Night Fever* as originating from a personal level. However, Siskel assessed the film as expressing "the desire of all young people to escape from a life sentence of boring work and attain their version of the beckoning towers of Manhattan." While Tony was dancing, "his problems were forgotten and his limitations were transcended," writes Ebert.<sup>236</sup> In addition to the disco's glittery images complemented by "Night Fever's" lyrics, the scene also introduced another piece of music fashionable during the period. "A Fifth of Beethoven," by Walter Murphy offered an electronic variation to the famous classical symphony and played as Tony and his friends entered the club. The instrumental transformed a dark overture into a fun and energetic beat. Walter Murphy's parody of Beethoven's original title conveyed the sense that going out at night during the late Seventies meant having a party. Therefore, he sampled Ludwig Van with a sense of humor. "Night On Disco Mountain," adapted from Mussorgsky's "Night on Bald Mountain," by David Shire, appears later in the film and reflects the same trend in the period's music.

*Saturday Night Fever* reflected trends of the "Me" decade's style, night life, and character's behaviors. In turn, the film illustrates the culture's extension of narcissism where expressions of pessimism increasingly shift toward hedonism. Daniel Bell argued that hedonism has "become the prevailing value" of American society in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976). He assesses the culture's preoccupation with self as creating individual

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<sup>236</sup>Roger Ebert, "Saturday Night Fever," 1 January 1977. <<http://www.rogerebert.suntimes.com>> (2004).

tendencies to deny any limits of experience where nothing is forbidden.<sup>237</sup> Bell focuses on how the fulfillment of self as a cultural feature reveals America's contradictions in the 1970s to the goals of its founding fathers. Nevertheless, his criticism of hedonism provides a fitting description of the culture that the characters of *Saturday Night Fever* embody.

*Saturday Night Fever* was responsible for bringing disco's underground culture, its night life, and music into the mainstream during the late 1970s. Consequently, the film's impact spawned a social movement in dance music and set fashion trends as a result. Peter Braunstein describes the rise and fall of disco in his article "Adults Only." Popular music in the 1960s included rock 'n' roll with politicized messages and dance music that consisted of "quick-shot tracks suited" for "the hyperfrenetic dances like the Chickenback and the Boogaloo." In contrast, Braunstein argues that "the laid-back Seventies demanded longer songs that allowed dancers to get their groove on."<sup>238</sup> The "Philly Sound" recognizable in the O'Jays' "Love Train" and Barry White's "Never, Never Gonna Give You Up" introduced Seventies' music to up-tempo rhythm and blues. Discotheques increasingly began to use this style of dance music and "disco" became the popular term denoting both the venue and the type of music created specifically for it.<sup>239</sup>

Discos were still considered an underground party scene popular in the gay and black communities around the time that journalist Nik Cohn investigated it. Cohn's article, "Tribal

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<sup>237</sup>Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976), xi-14.

<sup>238</sup>Peter Braunstein, "Adults Only," in *America in the 70s*, eds. Beth Baily and David Farber (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 143.

<sup>239</sup>Braunstein, 143.

Rites of the new Saturday Night,” served as the genesis for *Saturday Night Fever* and appeared in *New York Magazine* in June of 1976. Cohn chronicled New York City’s nightlife and disco subculture. Instead of focusing on the scene’s actual origins, Cohn wrote a complete fabrication about his experiences at a Bay Ridge club called the 2001 Odyssey. He replaced his observations of a largely non-white and non-heterosexual club crowd with his own experiences from growing up in a working class environment. His publisher approved it.<sup>240</sup> Shortly after Cohn’s article, a music producer named Robert Stigwood optioned the rights of it for a film. Just weeks before the release of *Saturday Night Fever*, the *Brady Bunch Variety Hour* appeared on television on November 28, 1976. The Brady’s performance included disco renditions of “The Hustle” and “Shake Your Booty.” Thus, disco invaded mainstream America. Although a strong backlash against disco emerged with slogans like “Disco Sucks!” and “Shoot the Bee Gees,” as the filming of *Saturday Night Fever* occurred, the film’s affirmation of disco had a successful reception from audiences.<sup>241</sup>

*Saturday Night Fever*’s story, Travolta’s performance as Tony, and the film’s soundtrack made disco’s appeal more palatable for “hypermacho straight men.”<sup>242</sup> Tony’s working class background allowed audiences to identify with the story’s universal theme about overcoming obstacles and fears of growing up. However, the film’s essential ingredient is its soundtrack’s emphasis of disco’s euphoric sounds and sexual provocativeness. “VH1’s Behind the Music”

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<sup>240</sup>Reelinsider.com, “Saturday Night Fever,”  
<<http://www.reelinsider.com/saturdaynightfever.html>> (2005).

<sup>241</sup>Braunstein, 147-149.

<sup>242</sup>Braunstein, 147.

catalogued *Saturday Night Fever* as “The perfect marriage of music and film.”<sup>243</sup> The film represents a new format of film musical. Instead of the characters breaking out in song like traditional musicals, the music animates scenes and carries the plot forward. The music fits the narrative’s themes. Roger Ebert says, “Tony’s life is organic to the music.”<sup>244</sup> Tony performs his famous solo, in which Frank witnesses his talent, to the Bee Gees’ song, “You Should Be Dancing.” Each stanza before its chorus describes the role of a woman in motivating one to dance such as:

My baby move at midnight  
goes right on till the dawn  
My woman takes me higher  
my woman keeps me warm

What you doin’ on your back aah  
What you doin’ on your back aah?  
You should be dancing, yeah  
dancing, yeah<sup>245</sup>

“You Should Be Dancing’s” description of a sexual encounter provides the reason for one to dance. Its upbeat rhythm fuels the excitement of Travolta’s performance. Tony’s dancing expresses his sexuality and attracts women to him throughout the film. Consequently, the music’s illustration of Tony’s talent encapsulated the culture’s casual attitude on sexuality indicative of the late 1970s disco scene. Andrew Holeran described New York City’s disco scene by its sense of abandon. “They were bound together by a common love of a certain kind

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<sup>243</sup>“VH1's Behind the Music,” *Saturday Night Fever*, DVD, special feature (Paramount Pictures, 2002).

<sup>244</sup>Ibid.

<sup>245</sup>Barry, Robin, and Maurice Gibb, “You Should Be Dancing,” *Saturday Night Fever Soundtrack* (Hollywood: Robert Stigwood Organisation, 1977).



of music, physical beauty, and style.”<sup>246</sup> Following the release of the film, mimics of Tony Manero became popular at clubs like Studio 54.<sup>247</sup> Sex, Drugs, and Disco altered the previous generation’s banner by simply replacing rock ‘n’ roll with the latest trend in music. Men appeared in attire that resembled dancers in *Saturday Night Fever*. They wore white suits, polyester shirts, and gold chains. Dancers performed their own version of Tony’s signature moves. His famous finger pointing, up and down, still inspires replications on dance floors that simply celebrates having a fun time. Hence, the film helped popularize America’s disco fever and reinforced the culture’s hedonistic trends.

Paul Pape, who starred as Double J., has said that *Saturday Night Fever* represented a “time capsule of (the period’s) disaffected youth in search of their identity.” Pape’s sentiments reinforce the story’s theme about Tony’s survival and represents a variation of the culture’s collective search for self-fulfillment. Both individual and collective vanity, visibly apparent in the film, illustrates the period’s narcissism. Tony projects conceitedness from the moment audiences first see him. Walking to the beat of “Staying Alive” in the film’s opening sequence, Tony’s confident strut signifies his egotism and attracts attention from bystanders. In fact, John Travolta’s teen idol image mirrored his on-screen persona. Hundreds of young girls flocked to Bay Ridge to watch the filming of the scenes where he walked down the streets.<sup>248</sup> The Bee Gee’s lyrics complement Tony’s spirit when they sing, “Well, you can tell by the way I use my

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<sup>246</sup>Braunstein, 143.

<sup>247</sup>“VH1's Behind the Music” (2002).

<sup>248</sup>“Director’s Commentary,” *Saturday Night Fever*, DVD, special feature (Paramount Pictures, 2002).

walk...I'm a woman's man: no time to talk."<sup>249</sup> While the song plays, the camera shoots Travolta from several angles. Aside from carrying a can of paint, his appearance does not convey a working man's attire. He wears a red shirt with a flared collar underneath a black leather jacket. His opened top buttons reveal a gold chain. Shooting the action from below, from the side, and from the front captures Tony's inflated image of himself.

Although Tony is on his way back to work with a customer waiting, he makes two stops. First, he stops at a pizza parlor where he buys two slices, stacks one on top of the other, and eats both as he continues to walk. Then, a blue shirt in a store window catches his eye. Tony runs into the store and puts five dollars down on it. He assures the store manager that he will be back at the end of the day because he wants to wear it that night when he goes out. He also compares his brown, platform shoes to a black pair in a store window. Overall, Tony's dress and actions signify a youthful determination to separate himself from his blue-collar roots.

At home after work, Tony gets ready for the night ahead. Using a "Super Pro" blow dryer, Tony fixes his hair in front of a large mirror as he shifts his weight side to side dancing slightly. "Night Fever" plays over the scene in anticipation of the coming night at the disco. As he dries his hair, Tony's subjective imagination dissolves to images of a club where men and women dance in unison through a smoke-filled disco floor. The scene cuts back to Tony brushing his hair back into a pompadour with a serious intensity. A Bruce Lee poster in Tony's room fills the screen, which then cuts back to a wider shot of Tony staring at his body in the mirror. He poses, notices Farrah Fawcett smiling at him from another poster, and he puts on two gold chains. He stands next to a poster of *Rocky*, symbolically, a story of another blue-collar

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<sup>249</sup>Gibb (1977).

hero of the 1970s. Tony gets dressed. He wears a pastel, fitted polyester shirt and pair of slacks. Tony's father enters his room and interrupts his ritual like preparation to tell him its time for dinner. At the table, Tony drapes himself with a linen sheet to protect his clothes from his mother's spaghetti sauce. Tony's father hits him on the head at the table three times and Tony finally shouts, "Will you watch the hair! I work on my hair a long time and you hit it...he hits my hair." Tony's concern for his physical appearance reflects the period's encouragement of vanity.

"The New Narcissism," by Henry Allen appeared in *The Washington Post* on Sunday, June 10, 1978 as part of a reaction to images in *Saturday Night Fever*. The article describes the emergence of male narcissism in American culture. Referring to the scene in which Tony adorns himself like a matador, Allen writes, "Men aren't supposed to dwell on their appearance, but even more they aren't supposed to admit that they all do." Allen argues that the film glorifies the fact that Travolta's working class character was unashamed to appear "sinfully feminine," and marks a cultural change.<sup>250</sup> He defines narcissism not in terms of love of beauty but as self-love. Indeed, taking care of one's body became a cultural phenomenon in the 1970s as the decade witnessed a surge in physical fitness.

James Fixx, author of *Complete Book of Running*, writes, "Having lost faith in much of our society...we seem to have turned to ourselves, putting what faith we can muster in our own minds and bodies."<sup>251</sup> Consequently, Arnold Schwarzenegger served as a symbol of

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<sup>250</sup>Henry Allen, "The New Narcissism; The Male Narcissist: He walks in Beauty...and His Face Is His Fortune," *The Washington Post Magazine*, 10 June 1978, 21.

<sup>251</sup>David Frum, *How We Got Here, The 70's: The Decade That Brought You Modern Life (For Better Or Worse)* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 173-175

bodybuilding in the documentary *Pumping Iron* (1977). Schwarzenegger, like Sandow at the turn of the century, inspired Americans using his muscle mass and displayed his impressive results from a lifestyle dedicated to strength training. Sandow, Vaudeville's most famous strongman, offered a restoration of lost manhood from his period's emasculating forces.<sup>252</sup> Decades later, American men and women, confronted by society's problems with a sense of powerlessness, accepted potential sources of strength through personal outlets during the 1970s. Running increased in popularity on a tremendous scale. Nike was founded in 1972 and quickly merchandised their \$75 waffle-soled shoes. The Gallup poll estimated 15 million Americans jogged on a regular basis by 1978. *Runner's World*, a magazine for joggers, increased in its circulation more than 400% between 1977 and 1978. Tennis and cycling also experienced booms in its equipment related sales for everyday consumers. Health food stores doubled in the country as well. The period's fitness trends, a luxury to most Americans, entrenched itself most prominently in the middle and upper classes and did not generally extend to areas like Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. However, Tony's superficial obsession with his image, epitomized by his posing in front of his mirror, represented a spillover from the consumer culture's popular trends.

Christopher Lasch commented that advertising, "serves not so much to advertise products as to promote consumption as a way of life." He argued that the impact of the nation's consumer culture left Americans feeling "unsatisfied, restless, anxious, and bored."<sup>253</sup> Tony Manero's interests reflect more of a byproduct of the period's consumerism than the higher

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<sup>252</sup>John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 50.

<sup>253</sup>quoted in Michael Schudson, *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 6.

classes' health conscious trends. Nevertheless, Tony values his physical appearance and personal fitness even though his neighborhood may not have encouraged him to play tennis. The film characterizes Tony as preferring basketball and dancing to jogging, and pizza and White Castle burgers to alfalfa sprouts. Although Tony indulges in gluttonous activities like smoking and drinking, when it comes to his image on the dance floor, his discipline for looking good becomes paramount. The description of his preparation to go out already testifies to his concern for his hair and clothes. Men's fashion in the 1970s veered away from the scruffy hippie look of the 1960s. The width of ties and use of brighter colors reflected boldness and not wearing ties at all became more common. *Saturday Night Fever's* first images of Tony illustrate the period's boastful yet casual styles as they draw attention to his platform shoes and bell-bottom pants. Many men began patronizing beauty salons where they promoted a blow-dried look.<sup>254</sup> Warren Beatty's role as a hair stylist and lady's man in *Shampoo* (1975) showed him sporting a blow-dried haircut. His character signifies the period's redefinition of traditional gender stereotypes. Allen's article reports his visit to a salon where he spent \$36 on a facial. He says, "Now it's facials...Men have not wanted smooth skin on their faces until recently."<sup>255</sup> He notes that men use to want their face to look like old leather. Tony's working class status does not offer him such luxuries of New York's professionals. Nevertheless, Tony's commitment to dancing as his means for survival demonstrates examples of his self-indulgent behaviors and a working-class extension of the period's attention to physical fitness.

When Tony dances, he usually clears the floor. He puts on a show in which the crowded

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<sup>254</sup>Myron A. Marty, *Decades of Discord* (London: The Greenwood Press, 1997), 132.

<sup>255</sup>Allen, 4.

club turns into a group of spectators. Returning to the scene when Tony takes his brother to the disco, Tony gets tired of his partner and says, “Forget this.” He quickly makes room for himself. Joey says, “He’s taking over again.” The Bee Gees song, “You Should Be Dancing,” begins as Tony begins his solo. John Badham framed Travolta in a wide shot to dispel any notion that they used body doubles in place of the actor. John Travolta spent months training for this dance sequence. Tony’s moves require excellent athleticism, agility, and endurance to make it appear effortless. Travolta changed clothes several times between takes to keep his costume from showing his profuse sweating.<sup>256</sup> Responding to Tony’s performance, Joey tells Frank, “He’s the king out there.” Double J. adds that “He’s the best.”<sup>257</sup> Travolta’s dance training mirrored his character’s discipline in practicing for the 2001's dance contest.

Annette, played by Donna Pescow, is a neighborhood girl who likes Tony and sadly wants nothing more than his attention. At the beginning of the film, Annette suggests that they enter the contest as a team. Tony acts very rudely towards Annette. As he lights his cigarette, she holds hers out for him to light and he blows out the match instead. Tony agrees to dance with her under the condition that they have to practice. He emphasizes, “We’re not dating...not socializing.” When she questions his insistence, Tony tells her, “The last time we went out...The whole time...All you did was talk about your married sisters...And I kinda got the feeling that all you was interested in was being married sister yourself.”<sup>258</sup> As they practice, Annette declares, “It’s only dancing!” Tony responds, “If you’re not going to take this seriously, I don’t want to

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<sup>256</sup>“Director’s Commentary” (2002).

<sup>257</sup>Wexler (1977).

<sup>258</sup>Wexler (1977).

dance.” Her ineffective attempts to win him over represent the period’s changing cultural norms.

The singles’ scene replaced traditional living arrangements as shown in the analysis of *Annie Hall*. Part of Tony’s narcissistic survival requires that he avoid any entangling responsibilities similar to the trouble in which his friend Bobby C. gets himself. Tony distances himself from Annette because he cannot afford the pressure from her traditional neighborhood outlook. Instead, Tony teams up with Stephanie, who personifies the culture’s loosening views on relationships and because she is a much better dancer than Annette. Tony helps Stephanie move into her new apartment in Manhattan. The scene reveals her cohabitation with a co-worker named Jay. She introduces Tony to Jay as her “friend” and Jay introduces himself bluntly as “unspecified status.” Jay corrects her use of the word “super” in front of Tony, telling her “nobody says super anymore.” Stephanie, like Annie, finds herself in a Pygmalion dynamic as she tries to acclimate herself to a more sophisticated lifestyle in Manhattan. In addition, Stephanie’s representation of the singles’ scene illustrates a popular trend occurring in the 1970s. David Frum argues that cohabitation offered a relationship more lasting than an affair without the expectation that it will last forever.<sup>259</sup> Ultimately, Tony’s relationship with Stephanie becomes platonic. They rehearse together for the film’s climax to “More Than A Woman,” by the Bee Gees.

The lyrics of “More Than A Woman,” express a man’s affections for a woman. It plays over two scenes of the film in which Tony dances with Stephanie. Its sentiments include:

Here in your arms I found my paradise

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<sup>259</sup>Frum, 92.

My only chance for happiness  
And if I lose you now, I think I would die  
Oh, say you'll always be my baby  
We can make it shine  
We can take forever just a minute at a time<sup>260</sup>

“More Than A Woman” functions similarly to the role of every other song in the film. Once again, the music propels the narrative as they dance together. The lyrics illustrate Tony’s feelings for Stephanie without his verbal indication.

The 2001’s dance contest showcases professional dancers from outside of Brooklyn as competition for the club’s neighborhood favorites. Tony and Stephanie follow an energetic performance from an African American couple. Tony wears a white suit. Travolta originally wanted a black suit but John Badham persuaded him to go with white because it would make him stand out more.<sup>261</sup> They dance with elegance and grace, prompting Monty to call Tony “the Fred Astaire of Brooklyn.” However, a Puerto Rican couple are the last couple to dance and give an electrifying performance that Tony knows is better than their own. Regardless of his opinion, Tony and Stephanie win the contest. As they receive their trophy, the film’s theme song, “Staying Alive,” plays over the scene. In contrast to the film’s opening, the lyrics convey a more mature perspective from Tony about his life:

Got the wings of heaven on my shoes  
I’m a dancin’ man and I just can’t lose  
You know it’s all right, it’s OK  
I’ll live to see another day.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>260</sup>Barry, Robin, and Maurice Gibb, “More Than A Woman,” *Saturday Night Fever Soundtrack* (Hollywood: Robert Stigwood Organisation, 1977).

<sup>261</sup>“Director’s Commentary” (2002).

<sup>262</sup>Gibb (1977).



“Staying Alive” in this instance of the film underscores Tony’s revelation. The judges’ decision exposes the neighborhood’s prejudices and Tony realizes the outcome is wrong. In spite of his disapproval, he realizes that dancing will serve as an opportunity for his future survival.<sup>263</sup> His appreciation of the Puerto Rican couple’s dancing supercedes his desire to flaunt himself as a local hero. His neighborhood pride does not matter to him anymore. He gives the trophy and prize money to the Puerto Rican couple because he thinks they deserve it and walks out of the club. Subsequently, the night ends with Bobby C. falling off the Verrazano Bridge and drowning. His fate signifies his failure to deal with the pressure of having to marry his pregnant girlfriend. Bobby C., often a sad scapegoat to his friends’ abuse and apathy, also represents a sense of alienation in urban America. Consequently, Travis Bickle and Alvy Singer both expressed versions of Bobby C.’s sentiments of isolation in their narratives. After the incident, Tony decides that he must leave Brooklyn and move to Manhattan. He spends the rest of the night wandering alone on the subway and the city’s streets. The scene illustrates Tony’s experiences with feelings of alienation and leads him to a personal crossroads. The next morning he tells Stephanie, “I’m not going back there,” after he spends the whole night walking and thinking. Tony grows up over night and confronts his future. He hopes that he will succeed with his talent and hard work.

The end of the 1970s did not cast aside the decade’s trend of collective narcissism. The 1980s was characterized very much by aspects of its previous period that earned the “Me” decade as its label. Material consumption and a cultural obsession with one’s personal image continued trends of health and fitness in the 1980s that became more widespread during the

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<sup>263</sup>Graebner, 172.

1970s. However, the period's dour mood found itself challenged by a spirit of optimism. Tony's hope that hard work will achieve personal growth signifies his character's maturity. His departure from his past also represents an attitudinal shift in American culture. The need to move away from the disillusioned spirit of the 1970s and embrace a positive outlook for the next decade became a hallmark of the decade's final years as it approached the early 1980s.

James Hougan argues that America's cultural malaise and diagnosis as "incurable" from many contemporary social critics is "something of a relief." He views the period's narcissism as a cultural evolution that has approached "stellar intensities." Thus, Hougan views American society in the 1970s optimistically because like a dam waiting to burst, "all sorts of things are freed." He considers the period's decadence as a breeding ground for a better future.<sup>264</sup>

Likewise, Peter Clecak argues that the period's quest for self-fulfillment represents a positive social byproduct. "The main social effect of this multi-faceted search was a rapid democratization of personhood." Clecak describes both the 1960s and 1970s as enhancing cultural options for a greater multitude of Americans as the result of a rise in collective narcissism.<sup>265</sup> Therefore, as popular sentiments of American disenchantment began to fade, films that expressed similar socially conscious messages found themselves replaced by a new wave in the movie industry.

The advent of "blockbuster" cinema bolstered optimistic appraisals for a new decade. Films that generated customers for repeated viewings like *Jaws* (1975), *Rocky* (1976), and *Star*

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<sup>264</sup>James Hougan, *Decadence: Radical Nostalgia, Narcissism, and Decline in the Seventies* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1975) 7-9.

<sup>265</sup>Peter Clecak, *America's Quest for the Ideal Self: Dissent and Fulfillment in the 60s and 70s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 6.

*Wars* (1977) qualified as blockbusters and heralded the industry's commercial revival. Moreover, the success of films that provided uplifting escapes from reality echoed audiences' desire to move away from the past. Films prior to the advent of blockbusters focused on politicized themes related to the legacy of Watergate and the war in Vietnam. Whereas *Taxi Driver* and *Annie Hall* emphasize the period's disillusionment with contemporary America, blockbusters like *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) focused on redemptive qualities of the human spirit. The latter's characters express the powerful impact that individuals can make in the world.

As popular films began to reflect more optimistic themes and attracted larger audiences in the process, blockbusters won increasing support from a new commercial force in its industry. In response to the tidal wave of record breaking box office films, studios focused more on how to package its products, using innovative marketing strategies, than on the film's content. George Lucas' *Star Wars* related merchandise enabled him to finance his own studio, a subsequent corporate entity, and series of film sequels. Thereafter, studios were not as inclined to take risks with films of an independent nature that had controversial themes and subject matter. Films of the late Sixties and early Seventies spawned a Hollywood Renaissance that produced films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969). Their low-budgets and cavalier style of filmmaking opened the door for a film school generation in the first half of the 1970s to experiment with their craft. Instead of continuing to support the decade's initial wave of cinema and its trends, the industry focused on producing films with marketing packages in accordance with a blockbuster formula of success.

Aside from merchandising, another highly successful marketing tool in the late 1970s

relates to the success of *Saturday Night Fever*. The release of the film's soundtrack before its theatrical release and improvements in audio technology in theaters enhanced the film's reception and attracted audiences on a blockbuster scale. John Travolta noticed *Saturday Night Fever*'s phenomenal success primarily as a musical spectacle. Its muckraking themes of other urban narratives like *Taxi Driver* and *Annie Hall* did not represent its major source of impact. Travolta told an interviewer, "When you talk to kids who've seen it many times, you discover they don't even like the story...to them, the movie is a concert."<sup>266</sup> Like other blockbusters, the film's marketing created an event for moviegoers.

In the case of *Saturday Night Fever*, the film's music and John Travolta's stardom overshadowed its messages about survival in urban America. Norman Wexler borrowed themes from his previous work in *Joe* (1970) about the working class conditions in post-Watergate America. Although he included this subject matter in his screenplay for *Saturday Night Fever* in which he described life for a Catholic and Italian family in Brooklyn, the film's inception originated from mainly commercial considerations. Robert Stigwood, a music producer, optioned the film rights to Nik Cohn's article, "Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night" in 1976. Although a fabrication, Cohn earned a screen credit for *Saturday Night Fever* and co-wrote its sequel, *Staying Alive* (1983). Stigwood, an Australian music mogul, was already successful before he produced *Saturday Night Fever*. His background as a music producer differed from the film school influences of Martin Scorsese and the comedy career of Woody Allen. Although not a film director, Stigwood's ambitious, professional style had an impact on his final product.

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<sup>266</sup>Quoted in Stuart Byron, "Fourth Annual Grosses Gloss," *Film Comment* 15, no. 2 (March-April 1970), 72, quoted in David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam* (New York: C. Scribner, 2000), 55.

Stigwood maintained the complete control of his business ventures from agency and management to publishing and concert promotion throughout the 1960s. Stigwood managed the Bee Gees and made his transition into film and television in the early Seventies. He produced a film adaptation of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973). His film production of The Who's *Tommy* (1975) became Stigwood's first highly successful fusion of music and film.<sup>267</sup> His optioning of Cohn's article provided him the opportunity to make use of his three picture deal with television idol, John Travolta. Stigwood had already intended Travolta to star in *Grease* (1978). Stigwood hired John Badham, another television crossover, to direct *Saturday Night Fever*. John Avildsen, the Oscar winning director of *Rocky* (1976), was originally picked as the film's director. However, Avildsen's vision of Tony as a neighborhood good Samaritan conflicted with Travolta's loyalty to Wexler's story.<sup>268</sup> Although pieced together on a restricted budget, Stigwood's experience in the music industry, careful assemblage of talent, and promotion of the film's soundtrack created a box-office success.

The film premiered on December 16, 1977. It was eagerly anticipated because Stigwood's company, RSO (Robert Stigwood Organization) Records released the film's soundtrack six weeks before the film's opening. Their "buy the record, see the film" strategy catapulted both *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease* into blockbusters and established an industry standard. RSO later produced soundtracks for *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Fame*

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<sup>267</sup>Duncan Kimball, "Robert Stigwood: Music, theatre, and film producer, agent, manager," <<http://www.milesago.com/people/stigwood-robert.htm>> (9 March 2005).

<sup>268</sup>"VH1's Behind the Music" (2002).

(1980). Stigwood has recently adapted *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease* into popular theater musicals. *Saturday Night Fever's* movie soundtrack stayed in *Billboard's* number one position for six months and sold 35 million copies. Four of the Bee Gees' tracks became number one singles as the period's night clubs and disc jockeys popularized their music in the disco scene. At the box office, the film earned \$74 million and became the third highest grossing picture of 1977 behind *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. However, Stigwood did not anticipate a problem that occurred with the film's marketing. The film's graphic content and use of language earned it an R-rating and restricted one of the largest groups of moviegoers, those between 12 to 18 years old, from attending the film.

Prior to the film's release, Judy Mann's article in *The Washington Post* warned parents that its content was unsuitable for young audiences. Mann asked, "Should you let your 12-year-old, the one who has idolized John Travolta as the lovable hellion Vinnie Barbarino on television's 'Welcome Back Kotter,' see Travolta as Tony Manero?" Mann presented a parent's assessment that, "There's too much tinsel to distract them."<sup>269</sup> Although she agreed with the film's great reviews, Mann objected to its "four-letter words, heavy sex and violence." She added that "while an adult viewer may understand the message of the movie, a 12-year-old caught up in the music may not." Ultimately, Paramount pictures withdrew the film, re-edited it, and re-released it with a PG rating in 1979 to account for its marketing mistake.<sup>270</sup> J. Hoberman, a film critic, argues that *Saturday Night Fever* became "the first post-sixties youth film with a

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<sup>269</sup>Judy Luce Mann, "'Saturday Night Fever' Poses Parental Headache," *The Washington Post*, 7 July 1978, D1.

<sup>270</sup>David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000), 54-56.

contemporary setting.” In harnessing a youth market, unaware of its cultural relevance, the film’s commercial success did not depend on its honest depictions of Brooklyn’s local color. Rather, the film’s popular audience sought and appreciated its musical and dance sequences.

*Saturday Night Fever* illustrated a lesson to the film industry that the content was not as crucial to the form in the late 1970s. Thus, the film represents a hybrid of the period’s waves of film making. It criticized contemporary conditions of an urban environment like in *Taxi Driver* and *Annie Hall*. However, its success on a blockbuster scale depended on Stigwood’s marketing and use of music and sound. Consequently, *Grease* represented the decade’s lingering desire for nostalgia as its setting returned audiences to the 1950s. Nevertheless, the predominant wave of blockbuster cinema in the late 1970s increasingly emphasized American society’s readiness for a more optimistic future. While audiences viewed double features of *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*, theaters enhanced their moviegoing experience by using the latest in audio technology. Theaters converted to high-quality Dolby sound at a rapid pace. The success of *Star Wars* and its use of Dolby equipment caused a rush to install such equipment. By 1979, 1200 theaters used it. Surveys concluded that ninety percent of film audiences considered Dolby sound as making a difference in the impact of a film.<sup>271</sup> Robert Stigwood took advantage of the period’s trends in sound and spearheaded the film’s emphasis on its music, which became a main reason mass audiences went to see the film.

Using the “lifelike production of sound at their conceptual core,” *Saturday Night Fever* became one of several blockbusters of the 1970s.<sup>272</sup> Without the Bee Gees music playing

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<sup>271</sup>Cook, 408.

<sup>272</sup>Cook, 218.

throughout the film, *Saturday Night Fever* would not have captured the period's themes reflected by its main character. Their music added another dimension to Tony's character in which the sound conveys his talent and spirit. Moreover, Tony's escape from his daily, humdrum existence and search for meaning came from the vibrant sounds of the period's disco, amplified in high fidelity, and helped to usher out the decade for audiences on a positive note. Pessimism shifted toward hedonism and liberalism found itself overwhelmed by conservatism and the end of the 1970s.



## CONCLUSION

Garth Jowett argued that “the movies have also been a mirror, both absorbing and reflecting the society that created it; and while they do not necessarily provide us with an accurate historical portrait of their milieu, they can, with careful analysis, tell us a great deal.”<sup>273</sup> The cultural analyses of *Taxi Driver*, *Annie Hall*, and *Saturday Night Fever* took Jowett’s assessment a step further by presenting them in relation to the period’s history. Their illustrations of American disillusionment and the culture’s search for self-fulfillment represented reactionary products to the decade’s social trends. As changes continued to occur in the period’s economic and political landscape and approached a new decade, so did the subjects of films produced in its industry. An increase in optimism and resurgence of conservatism by the end of the 1970s had an impact on the period’s style and content of films. The prominence of films imbued with social commentary, personal origins, and a mood of pessimism increasingly yielded to blockbuster formulas with more escapist, commercially oriented, and uplifting content. Subsequently, each filmmakers’ career after the releases of *Taxi Driver*, *Annie Hall*, and *Saturday Night Fever* varied in their acceptance of new trends in cinema but still reflected the culture’s narcissism in their work.

Ronald Reagan confronted Jimmy Carter’s “crisis of confidence,” presented voters with conservative alternatives to postwar liberal traditions, and became president at the dawn of a new American decade. White-collar workers increased their overall voting power while blue-

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<sup>273</sup>Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 457.

collar workers declined in theirs between 1968 and 1980.<sup>274</sup> Reagan's emboldening of the United States foreign policy through an escalation of the arms race and short-term relief to taxpayers offered an image of American strength after a period of setbacks and limitations. He said, "Americans are hungry to feel once again a sense of mission and greatness."<sup>275</sup> His election to the presidency signified American voters' sentiments that believed in a brighter economic future. Although a shift toward optimism occurred, cultural trends of collective narcissism continued throughout the 1980s. The "Me" decade's roots, planted in the 1970s, abandoned its disillusioned spirit, and prospered in a period that thrived on material consumption and personal excess.

Popular culture echoed Reagan's hopeful approach to the future in the film industry's production of blockbuster entertainment, its subsequent trend of sequelization, and intensified marketing to youth audiences. Popular features of the latter half of the 1970s influenced American cinema during the 1980s. The commercial successes of *Jaws* (1975), *Rocky* (1976), and *Star Wars* (1977) spawned a string of sequels and became film franchises. Studios relied on the films' previous box-office records to attract audiences. Consequently, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) became the second highest grossing film of all time only behind its predecessor, *Star Wars* only to be surpassed by *E.T.* two years later, which Steven Spielberg admitted was a follow-up to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977).

Innovations in special effects seen in many films of the late 1970s like *Superman* (1978)

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<sup>274</sup>Thomas Byrne Edsall, *The New Politics of Inequality* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 182-185.

<sup>275</sup>Carroll, 198.

and *Alien* (1979) enabled narrative techniques to become as significant as their content. Thus, studios increasingly packaged films according to their marketable qualities above their thematic merits. David Cook argues that American cinema “combined state-of-the-art special effects with the old action genres of the thirties and forties.” Therefore, single films could simultaneously appeal to multiple markets of moviegoers. For instance, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) presented an adventure spectacle for youth audiences while also containing “tapestries of allusion for an older, more cinematically sophisticated” moviegoer.<sup>276</sup> Making inordinate amounts of money on single films, blockbusters specifically became the main goal of an industry that had recently revived itself from a financial crisis between 1969-1971.

Theaters changed in response to the drawing power of blockbusters. Multiplexes, equipped with the latest audio technology, began replacing smaller movie houses by the end of the 1970s. Films marketed to teenagers reflected American suburbanization throughout the 1980s. Films by John Hughes such as *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), and *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986) introduced American teen audiences to a group of young actors known as the “Brat Pack.” In accordance with the period’s sense that a resurgence of its national strength occurred under the Reagan administration, teen films celebrated the lifestyles of the president’s constituency, mainly upper-middle class, white Americans. The total number of theater screens continued to grow throughout suburbia and surpassed its peak that had existed during the 1940s.<sup>277</sup>

So what happened to the frank cinematic depictions of urban America and the socially

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<sup>276</sup>Cook, 288.

<sup>277</sup>Cook, 407.

conscious films of the 1970s in the age of the blockbuster? First of all, the Seventies' spirit of personal expressions from filmmakers did not adapt successfully to big-budgeted formulas. The initial appeal for studios in producing films with subject matter in the late 1960s and early 1970s had more to do with their cost-effective budgets than their taboo subjects and explicit depictions of sex and violence. Taking risks with the modestly priced *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Graduate* (1967), and *Easy Rider* (1969) not only launched Hollywood's Renaissance but also paid back their studio's investments with profits.

Filmmakers like Francis Ford Coppola and Michael Cimino failed to create blockbuster successes from their films' at the end of the decade. Both filmmakers' work overtly criticized American society. Coppola and Cimino had earned themselves artistic independence from their past successes respectively with *The Godfather Part I & II* (1972, 1974) and *The Deer Hunter* (1978). *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Coppola's Vietnam adaptation of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1926), tripled its original budget and barely returned its cost to United Artists. Cimino followed *The Deer Hunter* (1978) with *Heaven's Gate* (1980), an elaborate period film. *Heaven's Gate*, set in the American West during the 1892 Johnson county cattle wars, criticized frontier capitalism and lost \$44 million. Their lesson to studios emphasized that big-budgeted spectacles must rely on proven formulas with built-in markets or modeled after past successes.<sup>278</sup>

The most commercially successful films of the era offered audiences fantasy, escape, and optimism rather than risky million dollar epics from artists with socially conscious messages wanting to change how America viewed itself. The first wave of Seventies' cinema laid a permanent foundation for the industry's independent cinema, to which personal films became

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<sup>278</sup>Cook, 63-64.

primarily relegated during the age of the blockbuster.

The gritty perspectives of decaying urban America in films of the 1970s like *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Dirty Harry* (1971), *The French Connection* (1971), *Shaft* (1971), *Serpico* (1973), and *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) altered considerably in their focus during the 1980s. Crime in the streets was not as threatening. Hoodlums were characterized as easily surmountable by an Aussie with a big knife in *Crocodile Dundee* (1987). Crime itself took on a more appropriate image in accordance with the decade's trends of greed and material consumption. *Wall Street* (1988) depicted New York stock brokers waging a war over money where elitist financiers commit white-collar crimes to attain the American dream. Overall, the honest depictions of inner city decay of Seventies cinema moved out of the spotlight in the 1980s and had the luxury of, once again, focusing on the pitfalls of a new age of American affluence. The legacies of *Taxi Driver*, *Annie Hall*, and *Saturday Night Fever* and their creators reflected the period's cultural changes.

*Taxi Driver's* box-office success and critical acclaim earned Martin Scorsese his largest budget yet from United Artists to make his next film. *New York, New York* (1977), a film musical starring Liza Minnelli and Robert DeNiro, became a financial disaster and failed to attract audiences. Scorsese followed it by releasing a documentary about The Band's final concert. *The Last Waltz* (1978) presented a romantic farewell to the style of music emblematic of the late Sixties and early Seventies with performances from rock 'n' roll and folk artists like Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell. Scorsese essentially captured the end of a musical era on film as America approached the 1980s. Martin Scorsese, a product of the 1970s film school generation, has continued to imbue his films with personal messages and social statements. *Raging Bull*

(1980), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and *Goodfellas* (1990) reflected the artist's fascination in depicting a relationship between Catholicism and violence. *The King of Comedy* (1982), a satire about a man obsessed with wanting to become famous, revealed a continuation of the culture of narcissism into a new decade. The film's characters conveyed their shallowness, loneliness, and power, which Scorsese's dark comedy presented as the cost from elevating the status of entertainment celebrities in American culture.

One of *Taxi Driver's* most enduring legacies relates to its images of urban decay presented from Travis Bickle's perspective. His fixation to eradicate the city's scum, evident on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street in New York City while shooting the film, illustrated a portrait of urban American in the 1970s. Today, 42<sup>nd</sup> Street has witnessed a cultural revival and construction of the New Amsterdam Theater, home to the popular Broadway show, *The Lion King*. Nevertheless, the film's star, Robert DeNiro has recently tried to convince Martin Scorsese and Paul Schrader to produce a sequel to *Taxi Driver*. The film's writer and director have collaborated in recent years. They made *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999), which many critics believed was a follow-up to *Taxi Driver* because of its similar story and main character's perspective. The internet reports that DeNiro would like to pick up Travis Bickle's story from its ambiguous ending and revisit the urban vigilante in the present.<sup>279</sup> Thus, cultural reflections of the past have not entirely dissipated in spite of some measures of urban renewal.

Woody Allen's urban perspective has not gone away either. Allen has continually produced at least one film every year since *Annie Hall*. His step back from comedy in 1977

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<sup>279</sup>Movies Online, "Taxi Driver 2 a Possibility," *New York Post*, <[http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews\\_2619.html](http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews_2619.html)> (2005).

became a complete abandonment of it with *Interiors* (1978), a drama without Allen's use of humor. *Interiors* presented a view of a family undergoing the disintegration of several relationships and represented a further attack on the culture of narcissism. The family's patriarch decides to divorce his wife after a long marriage to pursue his personal desires for happiness after his children have grown up. Other characters present themes related to sibling rivalry, infidelity, and anhedonia. Allen returned to *Annie Hall's* similar style of comedy with *Manhattan* (1979), which many critics viewed as his "most accomplished work."<sup>280</sup> The film was not only an homage to his favorite American city but another reflection of how Allen's personal life became the subject for his art. *Manhattan* also tapped into trends of the 1970s associated with the singles' culture. The film followed Allen's character, Isaac and his relationship with a teen-aged girl named Tracy, played by Mariel Hemingway. Their on-screen love story, which depicted Isaac's sexual relationship with a minor, mirrored Allen's feelings related to a later incident in his life that led to his separation from Mia Farrow and cohabitation with her adopted daughter, Soon-Yi Previn. In addition, *Manhattan* and several of his later films like *Hannah and her Sisters* (1986), *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), and *Deconstructing Harry* (1997) have focused on themes related to fleeting love, infidelity, and existential quests for meaning. Therefore, *Annie Hall* began Allen's search for self-fulfillment on film.

Many films of the 1970s used nostalgia as an artistic device to relieve audiences from a present period's sense of discontentment with society. Similarly, Allen's period features became his most frequent choice of narrative form during the 1980s. *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982), *Zelig* (1983), *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), and

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<sup>280</sup>Cook, 122.

*Radio Days* (1987) all glorified various aspects of a simpler, more culturally progressive time in American history. Although Allen himself has not cast himself as much for his male leads because of his age, many young actors often fight for a chance to play his neurotic persona. Kenneth Branagh, Edward Norton, and Jason Biggs have been cast in Allen's recent films such as *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), *Celebrity* (1998), and *Anything Else* (2003). Each of them have imitated Allen's personal style of acting, stammered around the dialogue, ranted cultural criticisms, and expressed cynical views of life. Allen retains complete artistic control of his films, which often do not appeal to mass audiences of Americans, and definitely does not strive to achieve the status of a blockbuster supergrosser. Instead, Allen's work has fared better financially in foreign markets like France and Italy. Allen, one of only a few American auteurs, ironically still functions as a cultural barometer for mainly European audiences.

For the day of *Saturday Night Fever*'s public premiere, Gary Arnold wrote, "It remains to be seen what the picture may do to or for John Travolta." Arnold's scathing review for *The Washington Post* added, "I have grave doubts about the romantic potential of a young actor whose most appealing expression is a kind of dumb vulnerability."<sup>281</sup> The film's success corrected Arnold's misjudgement of a film and star that became a major icon of American popular culture in the 1970s. Travolta's third film for Robert Stigwood, which followed *Grease* (1978), became *Urban Cowboy* (1980). As Bud Davis, a blue-collar worker from Houston, Travolta's character learns about love and life while riding a mechanical bull. The film reemphasizes *Saturday Night Fever*'s theme of survival as Bud escapes his daily grind in the oil

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<sup>281</sup>Gary Arnold, "Take Two Aspirin, Maybe 'Fever' Will Go Away," *The Washington Post*, 16 December, 1977, C14.



fields each night at Gilley's, a local honky-tonk, where he perfects his bull-riding skills. By 1978, John Travolta became the second highest bankable movie star behind Burt Reynolds and remained in the top ten through 1980.<sup>282</sup> In nearly every film since *Saturday Night Fever*, Travolta has danced at some point to flaunt his graceful coordination and prove himself as an heir to American cinema's Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly. Nevertheless, each performance cannot help but summon his talent first shown as Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever*.

An attempt to recapture the blockbuster revenue of *Saturday Night Fever* led to the creation of its sequel. Sylvester Stallone produced, directed, and co-wrote *Staying Alive* (1983) with Nik Cohen and recast Travolta to see what had become of Tony Manero's life since he moved to Manhattan. The film included several new tracks from the Bee Gees and had elaborate dance sequences. However, *Staying Alive* did not possess the cultural resonance of its predecessor, failed to attract large audiences, and marked the beginning of Travolta's decline in popularity throughout the 1980s. He followed *Staying Alive* with *Perfect* (1985), a film about a reporter for *Rolling Stone* who investigates American culture's fitness obsession. Although the film represented another critical low point in Travolta's career, *Perfect* signified a continuation of the Seventies' narcissistic trend of personal preoccupations. In preparation for both films, Travolta dedicated himself to working tirelessly off-screen to look physically fit. Consequently, Travolta staged a career comeback and redefined his image in *Pulp Fiction* (1994). He played a hit-man named Vincent Vega and appeared visibly fatter and sleazier than ever before. The Motion Picture Academy nominated Travolta for his first Oscar since *Saturday Night Fever* for his performance.

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<sup>282</sup>Cook, 339.

Above any other cultural theme relevant to understanding the 1970s, the common denominator of *Taxi Driver*, *Annie Hall*, and *Saturday Night Fever* relates to their characters' personification of survival against the period's disillusionment. Travis survives the city's scum originating from decaying social structures. Alvy survives the aftermath of his relationship with Annie and his inability to experience joy in life. Tony survives his blue-collar existence by letting off steam at the disco. Ultimately, Travis, Alvy, and Tony all express personal versions of the culture's search for self-fulfillment as reactions to their hostile environments. *Taxi Driver's* antihero discovers his sense of purpose through extreme vigilance. *Annie Hall's* narrator finds meaning in therapy and analyzing his past. Lastly, *Saturday Night Fever's* hero matures when he accepts his personal responsibilities and decides to plan for his future. American cinema echoed sentiments of the 1970s and reflected the period's uncertainty. When hope returned, movies cashed in on audiences' desire for more uplifting entertainment. The culture's collective search for self-fulfillment, prominent in the "Me" decade, continued to serve as subjects for Hollywood and as an American social trend into the 1980s.

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