

University of Texas Press
Society for Cinema & Media Studies

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Source: *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Spring, 2004), pp. 18-41

Published by: University of Texas Press on behalf of the Society for Cinema & Media Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3661107>

Accessed: 12/11/2008 05:46

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Hard Hats and Movie Brats: Auteurism and the Class Politics of the New Hollywood

by Derek Nystrom

Abstract: This essay discusses auteurism as a professional-managerial class strategy, examining in particular the role of auteurism in battles over film production during the rise of the New Hollywood. Of particular interest are the class politics of two New Hollywood films: Joe and Five Easy Pieces (both 1970).

The story that the New Hollywood of the late 1960s and early 1970s used to describe itself—that a new generation of “movie brats” had wrested control of their films from the directionless, financially panicked studios and thereby established themselves as auteurs—is one that film studies has complicated for some time. Recent work has challenged the romantic and individualist ideologies implicit in this tale and emphasized the ways in which the studios adopted the discourses of auteurism for their own purposes. As David A. Cook has pointed out, “Auteurism . . . became a marketing tool that coincided nicely with the rise of college-level film education among the industry’s most heavily courted audience segment. Similarly, Timothy Corrigan has noted that the appearance of the American studio system” made the deployment of auteurism a potential solution to “the subsequent need to find new ways to mark a movie other than with a studio’s signature.”¹

Yet as salient as these revisionist accounts are, they tend to focus on the role of auteurism in the economies of distribution and consumption. This article will focus instead on the place of auteurism in the struggle over the organization of film production in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Many New Hollywood practitioners deployed the discourse of auteurism as an assertion of professional-managerial class prerogative against not just the studios but also the film unions. These battles affected the subsequent balance of class power in the industry as well as the representations of class identity in many New Hollywood films. This essay focuses on two of these films, *Joe* (John G. Avildsen, 1970) and *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970).

Such representations of class identity, in turn, functioned to address the larger cultural anxieties of the professional-managerial class during this period. This account of the role of auteurism in New Hollywood’s relations of production should prompt a reevaluation not only of this period of film history but of our understanding of the class politics of this cultural moment as a whole.

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When I describe auteurism as a professional-managerial class strategy, I am referring specifically to the terminology developed by Barbara and John Ehrenreich. They define the professional-managerial class (PMC) as “consisting of salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations.” Situated “between labor and capital,” members of this class engineer, administer, and supervise the workplace, as well as produce and sustain the ideological superstructures—such as the legal and educational systems, the mass media, and various state apparatuses—that help to ensure (in a highly mediated way, of course) popular consent to capitalist relations of production. As such, the PMC has an “objectively antagonistic” relationship to the working class in that its role is one of directing and controlling the workers in order to benefit the interests of capital.²

Yet the PMC often finds itself at odds with the capitalist class, especially over issues of occupational autonomy and technocratic reform. Indeed, the work culture of self-regulating professional expertise that legitimates the PMC’s authority over the working class is one that the PMC frequently invokes to declare its independence from the bottom-line concerns of capital—we might think here of the resistance of medical professionals to HMO-directed health care or the use of the tenure system in universities.

Since the key tenet of auteurism as a prescriptive discourse (as opposed to its earlier descriptive uses)³ is precisely this declaration of occupational autonomy from the interests of capital (here, the studios), we can understand auteurism to be a kind of professional-managerial class strategy. Many New Hollywood filmmakers used the PMC rationale of professional expertise to justify their need for autonomy from studio control. To take just one example, George Lucas described himself and his New Hollywood compatriots as

the guys who dig out the gold. The man in the executive tower cannot do that. The studios are corporations now, and the men who run them are bureaucrats. They know as much about making movies as a banker does. . . . They go to parties and they hire people who know people. But the power lies with us—the ones who actually know how to make movies.⁴

Such arguments for the special skills of auteurist filmmakers—and their subsequent resistance to studio authority—are the basis for the face of auteurism we have come to know. But what effects did these claims for directorial control have on the other end of the Hollywood class structure? In other words, how did the auteurs’ declarations of professional autonomy function with respect to the labor unions in the film industry? To answer these questions, we first need to understand the conditions of Hollywood film production in the latter half of the 1960s.

An overview of those conditions might start with A. D. Murphy’s 1968 editorial for the *New York Times*. In this influential piece (later reprinted in *Cineaste*), Murphy argued that the “inbred, protective unionism” of the Directors Guild of America (DGA) and the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE), which represents technical and craft workers, had caused a “near-total

freeze-out” of young people from most film industry positions. This “freeze-out” was abetted, Murphy asserted, by studio management “congenitally frightened at even the hint of labor trouble” and by other established filmmakers, almost all of whom, he claimed, “are afraid to speak out against the system.” According to Murphy, even the newly established American Film Institute—charged, in part, with cultivating and developing a new generation of filmmakers— “[approached] these unions in a supplicant’s posture.”⁵

While Murphy’s portrayal of Hollywood unions may have been exceptional in its vituperative stance, his basic contention was rather commonplace. As early as 1965, film professor Robert Gessner of New York University bemoaned the aging population of film industry workers—estimates put the average age at fifty-four—and placed “unions [and] guilds” at the top of his list of forces keeping “American youth . . . locked out” of the studio gate.⁶ *Television* magazine’s 1967 three-part series on television- and film-related unions confirmed this view of the unions’ power, depicting the film crafts as “locked in something resembling a strangle hold” by IATSE; the union was likened in a sidebar to “a feudal landowner” that “rules its province with an apparent disdain for outsiders.” *Newsweek* even found one DGA member who described Hollywood as “a police state patrolled by the unions.”⁷

These critics, and many others, argued that the unions’ autocratic control—over both film production in general and the entry of newcomers into the industry in particular—stemmed from the unions’ insistence on the need for experience rosters and minimum crew size requirements. Experience rosters mandated that all qualified union members had to be employed before a nonunion member could be considered for any job. Any nonunion member had to work a certain number of days before he or she could be put on the experience roster. Furthermore, minimum crew sizes often made the production of independent films prohibitively expensive. Therefore, young film workers had to wait for there to be full employment of unionized workers before they could gain entry into the industry—a difficult proposition during the 1969–71 slump. Meanwhile, those attempting to work independently often could not afford a union crew.

Frequently, then, in an industry described as the one with the “most highly unionized professional employees in the United States,” the filmmakers who would come to make up the New Hollywood got their first experience on nonunion sets.⁸ Indeed, the reason Roger Corman and American International Pictures (AIP) were so influential in helping many New Hollywood filmmakers (such as Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese) get their start is because neither Corman’s nor AIP’s films had “orthodox” union contracts and could therefore employ workers without union cards, often at extremely low pay and under exploitative working conditions.⁹

Other filmmakers, such as Brian De Palma, made their films “undercover.” De Palma made his first films in “absolute secrecy,” because “the unions say you can’t make a nonunion picture.”¹⁰ Such measures seemed necessary, De Palma argued, after the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) forced nine SAG-affiliated actors (including the lead) to withdraw from Robert Downey’s *Putney Swope* (1969) because the film’s producers had refused to contract with SAG. (Soon after this incident, letters

were sent to SAG members warning them not to work in “experimental” or “underground” films that did not contract with the guild).¹¹

The New Hollywood landmark *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969)—produced by the same company (BBS) that went on to make *Five Easy Pieces*—was made under a contract with the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians (NABET), a television-based union and rival to IATSE. NABET had been engaged in several jurisdictional disputes with IATSE in the years preceding *Easy Rider*’s release but had been unsuccessful at making inroads into the film industry. According to *Variety*, *Easy Rider* was “the first box office hit filmed under other than a [IATSE] agreement.” After 1969, NABET began to sign contracts with other independent producers, including the producers of *Joe*.¹²

The rise in nonunion and rival union filmmaking troubled the already precarious situation of the film unions at the time *Joe* was released. Combined with the continued practice of “runaway” production and the film industry’s general slump during the period, these challenges to the film unions caused many locals to begin the decade with 40 to 50 percent of their members unemployed—a situation one IATSE spokesperson declared he had not witnessed since the depths of the Depression.¹³ In response, the unions began making concessions in the hopes of spurring production and thus employment for their members. SAG, for example, eventually allowed actors to work at half its scale pay on independent productions if the budget was less than \$50,000.¹⁴

Perhaps more profound were the broad concessions IATSE granted if a production was budgeted at less than \$1 million. IATSE president Richard F. Walsh told *Variety* that the agreements reached between his union and the Association of Motion Picture & TV Producers (AMPTP) allowed for both “a great reduction” in crew size for these productions as well as the elimination on location shoots of the union’s requirement to hire additional local IATSE workers.¹⁵ Yet the effect these concessions had in spurring production was mixed at best, and dissatisfaction with them helped bring about, at IATSE’s convention later that year, the strongest challenge to Walsh’s presidency in his three-decade tenure.¹⁶

In short, the rise of the New Hollywood auteurs was accomplished through the weakening of organized labor’s power within the film industry. By forcing changes in work rules, by challenging the film unions’ bargaining power by encouraging the participation of rival unions, or by avoiding unionized labor altogether, New Hollywood filmmakers tipped the balance of class power away from the organized working class and toward the industry’s professional and managerial interests. Auteurism was more often than not the legitimating discourse for this class practice. For example, during the production of *Hi, Mom!* (Brian De Palma, 1970)—ironically, a film the director described as a satire on “the obscenity of the white middle class”—De Palma complained:

We can’t just hire technicians. Suppose I had a union crew here. All those guys are four hundred years old. I would probably have very little rapport with them on any level. You know, “We come, we do our job, we leave as soon as possible.” There can’t be that kind of feeling on a movie like this. Everybody’s committed, politically, because they like the material, in all ways.¹⁷

The generational logic of this antiunion perspective was a crucial element of the New Hollywood's reevaluation of the PMC.

Resistance to union labor was not limited to De Palma. According to Deborah Fine, a former librarian at American Zoetrope, Francis Ford Coppola demanded similar commitments from his employees, including one that precluded any unionization efforts: "The feeling from working for Francis is tough shit if you don't think you're getting paid enough or if you don't think your working conditions are good enough. There's a million people out there that would kiss the ground to work for him for nothing." Here, the auteurist insistence on the centrality of the director's vision contests a working-class (or, more precisely, a trade unionist) understanding of the workplace—one that focuses on fair pay, decent hours, and other nonexploitative working conditions—and instead emphasizes a conception of work that bespeaks a PMC orientation toward the intrinsic rewards of professional labor.¹⁸

Furthermore, despite its defiant rhetoric against corporate-run studios, the antiunion initiatives of the New Hollywood auteurs often played nicely into the hands of capital—a dovetailing of interests made clear in a *Variety* headline from June 25, 1969: "H[olly]wood's New Breed of 'Personal' Films Has Corporate Angle: Modest Budgets." Indeed, the story, about Coppola's *The Rain People* (1969), discusses the "unusual exceptions [that] appear to have been allowed" by IATSE and the attendant low budget of the film.¹⁹ As Coppola would later explain, he had falsely described the film as a documentary while it was being made in order to avoid having to hire a union crew. This creative labor practice signaled the potential convergence of the studios' concern with minimizing costs and New Hollywood aesthetic practices—in other words, the creative labor arrangements proposed a marriage of convenience between capital and the PMC at the expense of organized labor.²⁰

The Youth-Cult Cycle and the Crisis within the PMC. The battles over the organization of the relations of film production substantially influenced the articulations of class identity in some of the key films of the New Hollywood. The films of the "youth-cult" cycle—that is, those that, following in the wake of the unexpected success of *Easy Rider*, addressed the youth-oriented counterculture of the period—were centrally concerned with questions of class identity and class reproduction. These films, in other words, were about the crisis within the PMC over the functions and interests of that class, and ultimately over its very regeneration.

The crisis to which I refer was one prompted by the New Left.²¹ The Ehrenreichs note that initially the New Left was made up largely of activists born and bred within the PMC. When the complicity of many PMC institutions (especially universities) in the Vietnam War became more evident, "many students of PMC origin and destiny [became] disenchanted with their own class and its institutions." Yet when antiwar protests turned against the universities, many otherwise left-leaning faculty members repudiated these New Left campaigns—a repudiation the Ehrenreichs describe as motivated in part by the class location of these older members of the PMC.²² As Barbara Ehrenreich explains elsewhere, "The university is, after all, the core institution of the professional middle class—

employer of its intellectual elite and producer of the next generation of middle-class, professional personnel. Attack the university and you attack the heart—and surely the womb—of the class itself.”²³ Thus, we can understand one of the key antagonisms that produced the political and social upheavals that marked the 1960s as a generational conflict within the PMC over its legitimacy and its institutions.

This intraclass generational conflict also formed the thematic template of many, if not most, youth-cult films. In fact, several films of this cycle, all from 1970—*Strawberry Statement* (Stuart Hagmann), *R.P.M.* (Stanley Kramer), and *Getting Straight* (Richard Rust)—focus directly on student attacks on universities. The central conflict in these films turns on the question of whether the young protagonist will disaffiliate from the class for which she or he is being trained. In *Getting Straight*, for example, the protagonist spends the film oscillating between the New Leftish activism on his campus and the upcoming exams he must pass to be employed in a PMC-affiliated occupation (teaching).

With these issues of middle-class disaffiliation in mind, I want to draw attention to two of the most successful films of the youth-cult cycle, *Joe* and *Five Easy Pieces*—both of which triangulated their intraclass generational conflict through the working class.²⁴ In *Joe*, an advertising executive, Bill Compton, (Dennis Patrick) who is estranged from his hippieish daughter, Melissa (Susan Sarandon), is befriended by Joe Curran (Peter Boyle), a welder, with whom he finds common cause in their opposition to the counterculture. The youthful protagonist of *Five Easy Pieces* disaffiliates from his PMC origins by dropping out to become a manual laborer on an oil rig.

The rest of this essay will examine how the introduction of a working-class figure or milieu in *Joe* and in *Five Easy Pieces* serves to change the terms of generational antagonism, as a hitherto intraclass conflict is mediated by an engagement with blue-collar experience. Furthermore, these triangulated class dynamics evince traces of the class conflicts produced by the auteurist positioning of the New Hollywood. Finally, I will demonstrate how these auteurist attempts to solve, or at least to successfully displace, their intra-PMC generational disputes serve as models for the resolution of the larger crisis that beset the PMC during the period.

The Hard Hat Riots and the Discovery of the Working Class. It is difficult to discuss *Joe*—a film whose working-class “hero” encourages and participates in the killing of hippies—without also discussing the May 1970 “hard hat” riots in New York City and the widespread interpretation of them as signs of a working-class backlash against youthful, countercultural dissent. Virtually every review of *Joe* described its protagonist as a hard hat, and, in line with what Barbara Ehrenreich called the “‘discovery’ of the working class,” read the film as a piece of instant sociology.

The first riot occurred on May 8, 1970, when approximately two hundred construction workers, almost all wearing hard hats (and some brandishing their tools as weapons), crashed a peaceful antiwar rally near Wall Street in Manhattan and began beating the mostly college-aged protesters and a few passersby. The workers later proceeded to City Hall, where they turned their anger on liberal

mayor John Lindsay and managed to raise to full mast the City Hall flag, which was flying at half mast in honor of the four students killed at Kent State University earlier that week. In the following week, similar (although more peaceful) demonstrations occurred in the Wall Street area to express antiprotester, anti-Lindsay, and propatriotic sentiment. The culmination of these events was what *Time* referred to as “a kind of workers’ Woodstock”—a rally organized by the Building and Trades Council of Greater New York in support of President Richard Nixon’s Indochina policies; sixty thousand to one hundred thousand apparently blue-collar workers attended.²⁵

Reports on these events described them as essentially spontaneous outpourings of a prowar, pro-Establishment sentiment—the release of Middle America’s long-pent-up feelings of disgust and anger with the antiwar, countercultural left. On closer examination, though, the demonstrations proved to be not spontaneous at all; reporters noted the presence of gray-suited men directing the riots on May 8, and a few construction workers had called City Hall the evening before to warn that the construction union’s hawkish leaders had been disseminating plans among its rank and file to stage a confrontation. It was later revealed that many workers were promised that they would not be docked for time spent at the demonstrations—and some workers were even offered cash bonuses to participate.²⁶

But perhaps more important, it was not just construction workers who participated in the May 8 rampage. As the *New York Times* reported the next day, “There did not seem to be more than 200 construction workers, but they were reinforced by *hundreds of persons* who had been drawn into the march by chants of ‘All the way, U.S.A.’ and ‘Love it or leave it.’”²⁷ A later *New York Times* feature—about Joe Kelly, a construction worker who participated in the counterdemonstrations—explained that the majority of the counterprotesters were in fact office workers from the Wall Street area. As Joe Kelly himself put it:

I will say this: there was as many of these anti-war demonstrators whacked by Wall Street and Broadway office workers as there were by construction workers. The feeling seemed to be that the white-collar-and-tie-man, he was actually getting in there and taking as much play on this thing as the construction worker was. . . . I’d never witnessed anything like this in my life before, and it kinda caught me in awe that you had to stop and see what was going on around you. It was almost unbelievable. This was the financial district of New York City, probably the financial district of the world, and here was this mass clash of opposite factions, right on Wall Street and Broad, and you could hardly move, there were so many people taking part in this aside from the 500 construction workers. It was just something that you had to stand back and blink your eyes and actually look a second or third time, and you couldn’t believe that this was actually taking place in that particular area.²⁸

I will return to Joe Kelly’s evocative account of this truly astonishing historical moment. However, it should be noted here that, despite the evidently heterogeneous, cross-class identity of the counterprotesters, the events of May 1970 were (and still are) described almost without exception as evidence of the emergence of the “hard hat” as the new figure of conservative reaction.²⁹ In short, a cross-class

backlash against dissent came to be represented synecdochally by the working class—in this case, the white, working-class male. The question, then, is why?

Joe and Bill's Excellent Adventure. Although *Joe* was made before the hard hat riots, its plot mirrors the events of May 1970 in an almost uncanny fashion.³⁰ The film tells the story of Bill Compton, an advertising executive whose hippieish daughter, Melissa, lives with her drug-dealer boyfriend, Frank (Patrick McDermott). After she overdoses and ends up in the hospital, Bill goes to her apartment to gather her belongings. There, he runs into the boyfriend, they fight, and Bill accidentally kills him.

Bill goes to a bar to collect himself and sits next to Joe Curran, a welder from Queens who is in the midst of an extended monologue about “niggers,” “hippies,” “liberals,” “queers,” and so on. Joe mentions that he would like to kill a hippie, and Bill mutters to himself, “I just did.” Joe overhears him and tracks him down a few days later. But rather than blackmail Bill, Joe explains that he just wants to get to know him, since he admires what Bill did. The film then follows the two men through a series of encounters in which they engage in a kind of cross-class male bonding, until the two end up searching Greenwich Village for Bill's runaway daughter. They find themselves at a hippie party, where they partake of some marijuana and engage in some “free love.” But before heading home to their commune, some young men at the party steal Joe's and Bill's wallets. Bill and Joe follow the partygoers and end up shooting all the hippies at the commune, including, in an ironic yet predictable conclusion, Bill's daughter.

Washington Post critic Gary Arnold noted that *Joe* was originally called “The Gap,” referring, of course, to the generational split used as the film's narrative frame.³¹ In fact, the title character does not even appear until almost thirty minutes into the film. During this first half-hour, the film evokes the generational divide on several registers, especially in the brief confrontation between Bill and Frank, in which the opposition of youth versus age is overlaid with that of adman versus artist; materialist versus bohemian; sexually repressed rectitude versus libertine vulgarity. When Bill kills Frank and flees the apartment, the film cuts abruptly to Joe—his first appearance in the film.

It might not be too much to suggest that the film's jarring introduction conveys the sense that the violent generational conflict in some way engenders Joe's character. To put it another way, the generational gap produces, and is thus filled with, Joe. His appearance, in turn, allows the film to realign the available subject positions of social conflict, as the terms of debate are rearticulated away from those of an intraclass generational split, with all of its political and cultural antagonisms, toward those of a different kind of opposition, with a different set of adversarial identities.

This shift in social oppositions comes to the fore in the following exchange between Bill and Joe:

BILL: Now you see those buildings, Joe? Those beautiful monuments of concrete and glass. I work in one of them. And do you know what they do in those buildings, Joe?

They move paper. That's right—they pick it up in one place, and they move it to another place. They pass it all around their offices. And the more paper you move, the more important you are, the more they pay you. And if you want to really show how important you are, what you can get away with, you make little paper airplanes, and you sail them right up somebody else's ass.

JOE: You ever get the feeling that everything you do, your whole life, is one big crock of shit?

BILL: Yeah.

In keeping with the association of the lower orders with lower-body functions,³² Joe's presence seems to engender an alimentary and a scatological rhetoric. But Joe's status as Bill's class Other also prompts Bill to explain his class position. In response, Bill derides the emptiness of his profession with a kind of bitter, sarcastic glee and, perhaps more important, in rhetoric that could describe the occupational duties of most of the members of the professional-managerial class. Thus, Joe provides Bill with a working-class perspective from which to ventriloquize a sense of the apparent bankruptcy of his class's labor and to admit that middle-class existence is "one big crock of shit." Of course, this was precisely what the counterculture was saying. In fact, in the film's bloody denouement, Joe convinces Bill to join him in killing the hippies in the commune by reminding him that "these kids—they shit on you. They shit on your life. They shit on everything you believe in."

So why is it that Bill's friendship with Joe enables Bill to take pleasure in denigrating his professional status? There are perhaps two answers to this question. First, Joe does *not* shit on everything Bill believes in. In addition to their hatred of hippies, both men share a love of money. When Bill admits that his salary is \$60,000 a year, Joe's eyes light up with awe: "You gotta be kidding! Only movie stars make that kind of money! The fuckin' president of my union pays himself that kind of money!" In other words, when Joe realizes the level of material comfort Bill has attained, Joe's response is not, say, to sneer "How are your toasters doin'?" (as Frank does). Instead, Joe looks at Bill with increased admiration.

Second, while Joe's friendship with Bill provides the occasion for Bill's critiques of professional labor, Bill is almost always the one who makes these critiques. When Bill takes Joe to a bar filled with executives, for example, the latter remarks that the other patrons "gotta be smart" to have reached this level of achievement. Bill quickly undercuts this statement by demonstrating just how stupid and obsequious his fellow professionals are. Were Joe to articulate these attacks on the qualifications and skills of Bill's fellow PMCs, Bill might find himself in a position similar to the one he occupies in his confrontation with Frank—that is, on the defensive about his class identity. But by taking on Joe's working-class perspective as his own, Bill is able to ironize his status and acknowledge the ways in which it is upheld by a set of ideological fictions. At the same time, Bill's unmasking of class privilege does not require him to renounce said privilege. Joe may inspire Bill to look askance at his class identity, but Bill also can rely on Joe to respect and envy his material success—in sharp contrast to the New Left's and the counterculture's response to the PMC, which was to spurn its members materialistic pursuits and critique its role in perpetuating unjust social relations.

Thus, Joe's social location offers him only a site of *imaginary* identification with Bill—a fantasized space that allows him to provide only a foul-mouthed, masculinist derogation of his profession—rather than an opposing voice (which might, incidentally, offer a working-class critique of the PMC). As a result, the precarious and perhaps even defenseless nature of class distinction is admitted, yet in such a way as to preserve one of the engines—material acquisitiveness—of this distinction.

Ironically, Bill's imaginary identification with Joe is one that the film's audience seems to have made as well. When *Joe* was first released, several reviewers noted incidents in which young audience members shouted back at the screen "We'll get you, Joe!" after the shooting spree in the final scene.³³ This response is fascinating on a number of levels, but what is important is that the cry was not "We'll get you, *Bill!*" Even though both Bill and Joe participate in the shooting—indeed, Bill shoots his own daughter in the back—this act of violence is perceived to be entirely the responsibility of the working-class man—a perception shared by virtually all of the critics who reviewed the film at the time of its release.

By the end of the film, Bill's willed association with Joe's class location seems to have become so complete that Bill is subsumed into Joe. To put it another way, just as the class identity of the white-collar Wall Streeters who participated in the May 8 counterdemonstration somehow *disappeared* into that of the construction workers, so Bill's class position undergoes a kind of erasure through his alliance with his working-class friend.

As this erasure occurs, the site of generational conflict is transformed. The antagonisms and concomitant subject positions of the intra-PMC generational conflict—that is, an older PMC generation associated with a series of dominant political and cultural institutions versus a younger generation critical of and disaffiliating from those institutions—are displaced in favor of those of a new social landscape. The disaffiliating youth are now counterposed to a working class resentful of the very privileges that youth disavows. As the class locations and interests of men such as Bill are assimilated into the populist figure of the hard hat, the challenge posed by radical dissent toward the PMC's collaboration in capitalist power relations is transfigured into a battle between students and workers—that is, the principally named combatants of the May 1970 Wall Street demonstrations.

Joe's Working-Class Threat. It could be argued that this explanation does not take into account that Joe is a monster, that while we are asked to take pleasure in his character's vulgar disregard for middle-class pieties—indeed, this is part of what Bill finds so appealing about him—we are also supposed to view Joe's perspectives and actions as largely sociopathic.

How is it that Joe—and the hard hats with which he is identified—can act both as a representative for an earthy, authentic brand of traditional values as well as a figure of monstrous excess? Here, it might be useful to return to Joe Kelly's description of the Wall Street demonstrations. As we have seen, one of the most uncanny aspects of these events for him was that they occurred on the doorstep of "probably the financial district of the world." This was a fact not lost on journalistic

observers of the scene. As *Newsweek* put it, the police stationed around the financial district during May 1970 “look[ed] for all the world as if they were about to defend the palaces of capitalism and the Establishment from the ravages of some proletarian mob.” The *New Yorker* described how the streets in the City Hall and Wall Street areas “at midday lately have often resembled union shape-up centers.” And the *New York Times* editorial denouncing the counterprotesters characterized the participants as “rampaging unionists.”³⁴

This persistent association of the anti-antiwar demonstrations with organized labor suggests a kind of confused anxiety that bears further scrutiny, especially since the mainstream media by and large regarded the protests as unorganized and spontaneous (rather than directed by the construction unions). To put this more succinctly, why was the rioters’ union membership their most salient demographic characteristic (as opposed to, say, their race or gender)?

If we recall that 1970 marked the high point of the strike wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s, this recurrent attention to the protesters’ unionist identity becomes clearer. As labor activist Kim Moody notes, more than sixty-six million workdays were lost to strikes during that year, “a record exceeded only by 1946 and 1959 in the postwar era.” Workers, then, were indeed in the streets throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, but it was most often not in conjunction with any supposed support of Nixon’s Indochina policy. Instead, it reflected rank-and-file militancy, which challenged not only the automation and production speedups that had been and would continue to ravage the labor market but also the complacent and conservative leadership of the unions. While the hard hats’ anti-protester actions seemed to represent the “silent majority,” the headline of an October 1970 *Fortune* magazine feature story, denouncing the high costs of labor in the construction industry, made clear where these hard hats stood *qua* workers: “The Building Trades Versus the People.”³⁵ Therefore, although the anti-antiwar protesters offered an appealing portrait of a rising tide of traditionalist, conservative backlash, the presence of a “proletarian mob” on Wall Street may have also suggested, in a displaced manner, a labor militancy that threatened both to reorient the balance of class forces in the United States and to disrupt the global restructuring of capital.

The volatility of Joe’s character bears traces of this extratextual anxiety. After all, much of the film’s tension turns on the fact that while Joe may offer Bill reassurance and even encouragement for his homicidal action, Joe’s knowledge of the killing also serves as an implicit threat. Moreover, Bill’s responses to Joe’s outbursts of anger frequently reflect a sense of conspiratorial pleasure in one moment and a profound unease in another. Indeed, after meeting Joe, Bill’s wife, Joan, remarks that being with Joe “is like sitting on a powder keg.” In short, Joe—like the Wall Street hard hats—serves as both a savior and a threat.

Joe seems to offer the PMC a compelling rearticulation of the terms of social conflict. New Left and countercultural critiques of the PMC are preempted as younger members of the PMC find themselves pitted against workers, rather than against older members of their own class. Yet this rearticulation also suggests that such a cross-class alliance is inherently unstable, as the two classes do not necessarily share the same interests.

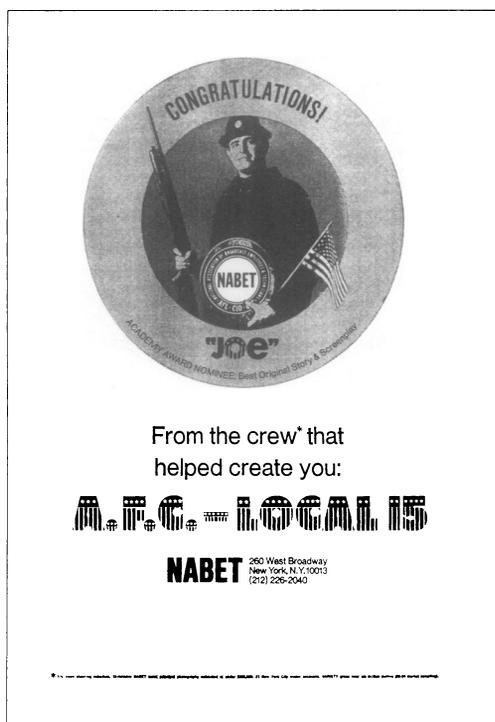


Figure 1. *Joe* (John G. Avildsen, 1970) as a site for battles over New Hollywood film production: a NABET ad from the April 7, 1971, issue of *Variety*. By working on New Hollywood films, NABET challenged IATSE's jurisdiction over film production. Courtesy *Variety*.

Given the contradictory material interests of many young New Hollywood practitioners and the film unions, it is not surprising that the working-class figures in films like *Joe* were so often depicted as antagonists to the younger characters in these films. Hollywood electrician Michael Everett, who began working during the 1970s on nonunion film productions because he could not get a IATSE card, claims that “the film unions looked to us like the same people who wore hard hats and beat up hippies.”³⁶ And even though such non-working-class unions as SAG often accounted for the difficulties New Hollywood filmmakers experienced, the recalcitrance of the mostly blue-collar IATSE came to represent the film unions’ obstructionism, as in *Sight & Sound* critic Axel Madsen’s reference to Hollywood’s “Archie Bunker unions” (whose “slow fade-out . . . nobody is mourning”). That *Joe*’s own below-the-line film production crew was affiliated with NABET—the rival, largely television-based union that sought to undercut IATSE’s monopoly on film production—further illustrates how prominent such intraindustry conflicts were in shaping *Joe*’s—and *Joe*’s—creation.³⁷

The influence of these intraindustry antagonisms is emphasized here because the relationship between youth and the working class depicted in New Hollywood films was not the one taking shape on the picket lines outside the headquarters of Standard Oil, General Electric, General Motors, and other sites of the militant strike wave of 1969–71. As historian Peter Levy has demonstrated, the willingness of many factions of the New Left to support the struggles of the Oil, Chemical,

and Atomic Workers, the United Electrical Workers, the United Auto Workers, and the wildcatting postal workers (among others) “showed that segments of the New Left and labor were reconciling their differences.” Yet, largely as a result of labor relations in the film industry, the idea of a student-worker alliance represented the unrepresentable to the New Hollywood. Thus, New Hollywood’s visual rhetoric of class eliminated one of the central targets of New Left critique—that is, the older generation of the PMC—and imagined in its place a working class that looked like the film craft unions: aging, politically and culturally reactionary, and, most important, hostile to the younger generation.³⁸

Five (Not So) Easy Pieces: Cultural Capital and the PMC. *Five Easy Pieces* would seem to be the rejoinder to this last argument—and an inversion of *Joe’s* class politics *tout court*. In *Five Easy Pieces*, we are treated to another generational split—this one between the film’s protagonist, Bobby Dupea (Jack Nicholson), and his concert musician father (William Challee)—yet here the working class seems to be aligned with the disaffiliated youth rather than with the older members of the PMC.³⁹ In other words, if Bobby can be said to be the male counterpart to *Joe’s* Melissa, in *Five Easy Pieces* his disaffiliation takes the form of joining *Joe* on the factory floor. Furthermore, *Five Easy Pieces* seems more dedicated than *Joe* to offering a thoroughgoing critique of PMC cultural capital, in that Bobby’s disaffiliation involves an emphatic rejection of his class training, as opposed to Bill’s jaded, ironic self-deprecation. The question, then, is how does *Five Easy Pieces’s* alternative triangulation of the intra-PMC generational conflict negotiate the relationship between cultural capital and the PMC—a negotiation that also reveals the importance of cultural capital to the positioning of the New Hollywood itself?

Five Easy Pieces’s inversion of *Joe’s* class alliances is matched in its narrative structure. The first section of the film is a portrait of Bobby’s working-class existence as a worker in an oil field, while the second part, after he learns his father’s health is failing, follows Bobby back to his family of music professionals, where he confronts the (upper-middle-class) life he has abandoned. Whereas *Joe* begins with a depiction of the generational split in the PMC, and later inserts a working-class character into this conflict, *Five Easy Pieces* begins with a depiction of working-class life only to have that narrative turn into a story about the protagonist’s alienation from his father’s professional world. Just as *Joe* is not introduced until half an hour into that film, *Five Easy Pieces* does not begin to hint that Bobby is anything other than a blue-collar worker for the first twenty minutes and reveals the extent of his family’s musical legacy only gradually during the latter two-thirds.

This shift in our understanding of Bobby begins with a scene in which he discovers a piano on the back of a truck trapped in the middle of a traffic jam and begins playing a piece by Chopin. This is the first sign that Bobby is, as *Time’s* Stefan Kanfer put it, “no average hardhat.”⁴⁰ Yet, rather than providing an adjoining expository scene explaining this musical outburst, the film proceeds to follow Bobby’s aimless blue-collar life. It is only much later that we learn that he was trained as a classical pianist.



Figure 2. Professional cultural capital in a blue-collar setting: Bobby Dupea (Jack Nicholson) plays Chopin on the back of a truck in *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970). Courtesy Photofest.

The withholding of information about Bobby's past—a sort of diegetic inversion of cause and effect—characterizes the narrative strategy of the film as a whole. This apparent violation of classical Hollywood's linear, causally motivated narration—described by Peter Wollen, in another context, as “narrative intransitivity”⁴¹—is a signal feature of what many film theorists and historians have come to call postclassical or New Hollywood filmmaking.⁴² It was this narrative intransitivity that was consistently praised by the film's many enthusiastic reviewers. In a typically glowing review of the film, Jacob Brackman, writing for *Esquire*, cited this scene as “the first in a series of astonishing fake-outs” that helped make *Five Easy Pieces* “the opposite of a genre film,” in that the viewer is offered “what you least expected and therefore most hoped to see.”⁴³ Similarly, Richard Schickel wrote in *Life* that the film “totally reverses our cinematic expectations”:

Typically, movies place their characters in some sort of emotional or physical peril, some forcing chamber which compels them to reveal themselves as archetypes. Here, however, there is no crisis. It occurred before the movie began. There is only a series of incidents—moments of anger, comedy, nostalgia, passing sadness—that reveal the central character . . . to be neither what we thought he was in the beginning nor anything like an archetype.⁴⁴

What is significant about this characteristically New Hollywood narrative strategy is the way it reframes our understanding of Bobby's supposedly working-class identity. As Brackman notes, up until the scene in which Bobby plays Chopin, "the movie promised to be a funny, scrupulously observed slice of oil town."⁴⁵ While one may debate how "scrupulous" the film's observations are, it is true that, for the first thirty minutes, *Five Easy Pieces* seems to trade in a kind of authenticity guaranteed by its working-class subject. The exuberant pleasure Bobby takes in drinking, card playing, and picking up women; his mixture of frustration with and affection for his waitress girlfriend Rayette (Karen Black); even his occasional existential alienation (suggested by his quiet melancholy when he is left alone for a brief moment in a bowling alley)—all are presented as emblematic of his blue-collar existence. Yet as the narrative reveals Bobby's past as a classical musician, all of these signifiers of his supposedly working-class identity are thrown into relief by the depictions of his PMC origins. We are now asked to see Bobby's pursuit of sensual pleasures as a response to the uptight, confined behavior of his family (personified by his father's paralysis, as well as the awkward prissiness of his neck-braced brother). Rayette represents both a relief from the "pompous celibate" that characterizes his family's social circles (as Bobby calls Samia, an overbearing intellectual woman he meets at a party), as well as an annoyance to a man who is presented as Rayette's intellectual and cultural superior (her inferiority is implied by her love of country music). Even Bobby's alienation is clearly shown to be a product of his educated disaffection.

In short, the latter part of the film asks us to view Bobby's experience of working-class life as negatively constituted, as a reaction formation to his middle-class identity. As in *Joe*, the working-class position in *Five Easy Pieces* operates less as a signifier of its own identity than as a perspective from which to analyze and critique middle-class existence. As if to underline this fact, the film largely abandons Bobby's blue-collar environment after the opening half-hour, retaining only Rayette, whose class-specific tackiness and ignorance tend to function primarily as an embarrassment to Bobby. The question, then, is *why* does the film choose this particular mode of existence, this style of dropping out, to signify Bobby's disaffiliation from his middle-class roots?

As suggested above, this choice is related to the film's preoccupation with issues of cultural capital. What Bobby's adopted blue-collar status seems to offer him is a way of disaffiliating from the cultural capital of his family's musical heritage. The weight of this heritage is underlined in a scene in which Bobby plays another Chopin piece, this time for Catherine (Susan Anspach), his brother's fiancée (whom Bobby is trying to seduce). As he plays, the camera pans in tight close-up across a series of snapshots and portraits of the many generations of Dupea musicians, as if to emphasize both the depth of his family's musical history and its suffocating burden. The Chopin prelude acts as a kind of score to this photographic montage. Thus, when Bobby claims that he felt nothing during his performance, it is as if he is disavowing any connection to his history. By denying any "inner feeling" when he is playing the piano, Bobby seems to disown the musical skills that are the cultural capital of his lineage.

This refusal may have caused critics like Penelope Gilliatt to view Bobby as representative of those who are “contemporarily the bane . . . of the United States complex of recruitment to industry,” even though his resistance is to a fairly rarified form of PMC labor.⁴⁶ Such middle-class disaffiliation—specifically from the cultural capital that legitimates the PMC’s role in the division of labor—strikes at the core of the PMC’s self-identity. Since cultural capital cannot be merely passed down to one’s offspring but rather must be reearned by each generation through education and professional training, the failure or refusal to acquire and embrace the fruits of this training cannot help but be read, as Barbara Ehrenreich points out, as a kind of “class treason.”⁴⁷ She notes that one of the most overt articulations of this sense of treason is Midge Decter’s 1975 jeremiad entitled “A Letter to the Young,” in which the author indicts the children of “America’s professional, or enlightened, liberal middle class” for their “voluntary downward mobility,” for not fulfilling their parents’ expectations of “manning a more than proportional share of the positions of power and prestige”:

You were to be its executives, its professionals, its artists and intellectuals, among its business and political leaders, you were to think its influential thoughts, tend its major institutions, and reap its highest rewards. It was at least partly to this end that we brought you up, that we attended so assiduously to your education, that we saw to the cultivation of every last drop of your talents.⁴⁸

Anxiety over class self-reproduction seems to drive much of *Five Easy Pieces* as well. It is not a coincidence that in the film’s emotional climax Bobby concludes his tearful attempt at a rapprochement with his silent, nearly paralyzed father by acknowledging his failure to fulfill his father’s professional expectations: “Anyway, we both know I was never that good at it.”⁴⁹

The Difficulty of Dropping Out. But just how complete is Bobby’s disaffiliation? A scene in the latter part of the second half of the film hints at ambivalence on this issue. During a party of intellectuals, Bobby explodes with furious rage at Samia after she treats Rayette with a kind of self-satisfied condescension. Bobby’s righteous anger at Samia’s snobbery is clearly another example of his rejection of his family’s world, and as such becomes another example of his disavowal of his inherited class position.

Yet the viewer cannot help but notice that Bobby frequently treats Rayette with similar condescension; thus, his vituperative attack on Samia seems directed as much at himself as at her. Further, his ensuing tantrum can be seen as a desperate attempt to escape the sterile intellectuality of his class of origin through a spontaneous outburst of proletarian physicality; he ends up picking a fight with the muscular Spicer (John P. Ryan), his father’s male nurse, as if to transmute (and displace) the verbal sparring at the party into a literal wrestling match. The almost pathetic impotence of this outburst—Spicer roughly subdues Bobby—suggests that Bobby has failed to disassociate himself entirely from the cultural prerogatives of his family.

In fact, Bobby’s sneering attitude toward elements of working-class existence (as they are represented in the film) demonstrates that his attempt at disaffiliation

from his inherited cultural capital does not entail identification with his adopted class. This is another sign that this latter identity serves a negative function in the film. Bobby may find classical music inauthentic, since it produces no feeling in him, yet he also disparages the country music to which Rayette is so attached.⁵⁰ Similarly, just as Bobby is shown to be visibly uncomfortable during dinners at his family's home, he also squirms during an evening in the trailer home of fellow oil rigger Elton (Billy Green Bush) and his wife, Stoney (Fannie Flagg), whom he mocks for her spellbound attention to the television.

Bobby's class-bound disdain comes to a head when Elton tells Bobby that Rayette is pregnant and that the right thing to do is to marry her. Just as Bobby resists being associated with his family, so too he resists being interpellated into the traditional role of blue-collar family man. When Elton remarks that he too was afraid of family life at first but that he has come to like it, Bobby sneers, "It's ridiculous. I'm listening to some cracker asshole who lives in a trailer park compare his life to mine."

Yet almost immediately, Elton's uncomplicated praise of the joys of family life is undermined by his arrest for skipping bail on a robbery charge. It is a crucial moment in the film—the working-class life that appeared to offer a space of coarse liberty for Bobby has begun to seem more like a prison, a feeling emphasized by the tight, almost claustrophobic close-ups used throughout the scene in Elton's trailer (which immediately precedes the scene in which Bobby rejects Elton's advice). Thus, when we realize that Elton too chafes under the limitations of "the good life" as he has described it, the effect is to rebuke Bobby's claim that their lives have nothing in common. As we watch Bobby fight with the men who have come to arrest Elton, Elton begins to appear as nothing less than a fellow blue-collar rebel—suggesting that Bobby's alienation is not solely the provenance of middle-class dropouts.

In yet another one of its "astonishing fake-outs," the film cuts abruptly from this scene to Bobby en route to visit his sister during a recording session. This unexpected narrative shift sets in motion Bobby's return to his family and his class of origin, abandoning Elton, as well as the working-class environs of the Southern California oil town, for the rest of the film. The question, then, is why does the break between the film's two main sections occur *here*?

To answer this question, we might compare this rather confusing moment of narrative intransitivity to a previously noted narrative "fake-out": Bobby's performance of the piece by Chopin on the back of the truck. In this scene, we can see the traffic jam in which Bobby is trapped as an objective correlative to the constraints on the hedonistic impulses of working-class life—especially since he and Elton are caught in the traffic because they have been sent home after showing up for work drunk. Bobby leaps out of Elton's car and shouts that the other drivers are "crazy" for spending "the most beautiful part of the day" stuck in their cars. He then notices the piano in the truck ahead of them and begins playing Chopin's "Fantasy in F Minor." As the truck pulls onto an off-ramp, and thus out of the traffic, with Bobby still playing the piano, the scene depicts an almost lyrical transcendence—it is as if Bobby "rises above it all" through his musicianship.

Bobby's figurative means of escaping this literal trap, though, are precisely the musical skills—that is, the cultural capital—that he endeavors throughout the rest of the film to renounce. One cannot help but see the parallels between this reaction to being trapped and Bobby's response to the news that Rayette is pregnant, which motivates him to return to the family he has repudiated and pursue a woman who is the opposite of Rayette. In short, when his negatively constituted, reactive association with the working class threatens to become too binding, too permanent, Bobby draws on the middle-class resources he otherwise disdains. In a film so dedicated to arguing "that intellectuality and culture are nothing but hollow shells inhabited by hollow shells" (as *Newsweek's* Joseph Morgenstern put it), the protagonist's repeated recourse to the realm of intellectuality and culture becomes nothing less than a kind of bad faith.⁵¹

Elton's arrest serves as the film's acknowledgment—conscious or unconscious—of this bad faith. That is, while Elton's resistance to the limitations of family life may establish him as a fellow blue-collar rebel, the juxtaposition of this resistance with Bobby's ineffective attempt to demonstrate his own alienation by quitting his job (his foreman responds dismissively, "I don't care what you do") dramatizes the ways in which these rebels and their respective situations differ.

In many ways, Bobby's bad faith mirrors the film's; just as the protagonist drops his working-class identity as soon as it becomes a hindrance, so the film evacuates its working-class setting after it has served its function of signifying the protagonist's middle-class disaffiliation. While that setting provides a way to imbue the protagonist with an earthy, authentic (and, not incidentally, masculine) brand of alienation, the film, despite its opening, is never about working-class life—that is, Elton's working-class experience. Instead, it is about Bobby's quasicounter-cultural rejection of cultural capital (the "crisis" that occurred before the film began, as Schickel put it) and thus must return to the site of the transmission of Bobby's cultural capital to finish the narrative. We can therefore see the scene of Elton's arrest, and his subsequent disappearance from the film, as the moment when the film runs up against its own contradictory investments in working-class experience. This contradiction is then circumvented through the film's reliance on a signal characteristic of its own cultural capital—that is, a self-consciously elliptical narrative strategy that refuses linear representations of character motivation.⁵² In short, the film evades the difficult questions it raises concerning class identity and affiliation via the use of the culturally privileged filmmaking strategies that would come to signify the New Hollywood.

For a film so ostensibly committed to critiquing the artistic pretensions of its protagonist's family, *Five Easy Pieces* frequently draws attention to its own. It does this not only through its aforementioned moderately intransitive narrative structure but also its frequently conspicuous cinematography. Stanley Kauffman echoes many other reviewers when he comments that "the photography by Laszlo Kovacs is extraordinary in a time when extraordinary camerawork is becoming common."⁵³

Other reviewers noted that the cinematography was excessively obtrusive; "frame after frame [was meant to look] like something destined for the covers of the photography annuals," critic John Simon complained. Simon singles out the

film's "grandiosely flashy shots . . . of the inactive machinery of the oil field looking, at nightfall, like a combination petrified forest and Calvary" as particularly egregious examples of this tendency.⁵⁴ Since the effect of such visual flourishes is to foreground the act of filmmaking itself—which has the corollary effect of calling attention to the cultural resources of the filmmakers—it is no coincidence that these moments of stylistic excess occur primarily in scenes depicting a site of working-class labor. In presenting its blue-collar subject matter through the lens (literally) of self-conscious cinematography, the film seems to offer a gritty realism. Yet, simultaneously, it imposes an aesthetic distance through its elegant compositions and meticulous attention to color. The effect is not unlike that achieved by Bobby as he plays Chopin on the back of the truck in the traffic jam—an authentic working-class location is both inhabited and transcended. Similarly, we might see the implicit contradiction between the film's formal embrace and its thematic rejection of highbrow aesthetics as analogous to Bobby's own radically ambivalent relationship to his cultural capital.

Thus, *Five Easy Pieces* can be described as a film shot through with antinomial impulses regarding cultural capital and class identity. While its working-class signifiers express a downwardly mobile and vaguely countercultural disaffiliation from middle-class identity, the concomitant deployment of various forms of cultural capital establishes a sense of distinction from these signifiers—a deployment that, in turn, seems at odds with the film's implicit critique of the class privileges such resources provide. Just as *Joe* presents an ironizing of class distinction that authorizes the ideologies of upward mobility and material acquisitiveness that help produce such distinctions, *Five Easy Pieces* offers a critique of the PMC's cultural authority, only to remain too invested in its own signifiers of cultural distinction to interrogate thoroughly the operations of taste that subtend the privileges the film purports to oppose.

"Men of Taste." The inability to relinquish the authority of cultural capital can be related to the aspirations of auteurism itself. After all, what was the motivation of prescriptive auteurism if not the hope that personal artistic expression would become the central organizing principle of an otherwise commercial form of mass culture? Yet this introduction of artistic expression was often formulated in the class-bound terms of taste, as in the claim of director Paul Williams (*Out of It*, 1969; *The Revolutionary*, 1970) that the New Hollywood was a place where

I can now go to Columbia or Universal or United Artists and talk to men of taste. This change is a class thing. Harry Cohn and Louis B. Mayer were lower-middle-class and made their films for the mass of people who belonged to that class. But now the film audience has grown more educated and so have the studio people. Directors don't have to deal with aborigines any more.⁵⁵

Just as the earlier, descriptive versions of auteurism frequently gave off a whiff of intellectual slumming—French theory used to venerate B-movie figures such as Samuel Fuller—so the prescriptive deployment of the term *auteurism* often reflected a delight in the proposed aesthetic transvaluation of this allegedly lower-

middle-class form. Auteurism thus presented itself as an infusion of cultural capital that promised to elevate cinema's class standing (and, not incidentally, attract a more affluent audience).⁵⁶ In this light, the aesthetic transformation in *Five Easy Pieces* of a lower-class milieu into an art cinema spectacle appears as nothing less than an allegory for the proposed transformation of Hollywood film by auteurs.

In the end, the New Hollywood resurrection of cinema via the cultural capital of auteurism had ramifications for more than just the film industry. While the transformations promised by the New Hollywood were often articulated as generational ones—as in Dennis Hopper's overheated claim that “we may be the most creative generation in the last nineteen centuries”⁵⁷—those opposed to such changes were often depicted as members of the working class, in the films themselves and in the industry at large. Whether actively hostile, as in *Joe*, or merely overly traditional, parochial, and ultimately dispensable, as in *Five Easy Pieces*, the working-class characters in the youth-cult films of this era are persistently associated with opposition or resistance to the cultural and political change represented by youth. This representation bears an uncanny resemblance to the New Hollywood's conviction that “every advance” in New Hollywood filmmaking “has been a battle against vested labor interests.”⁵⁸

This filmic vision of the working class dovetails with representations in the popular press, such as *Time's* characterization of workers as “the Americans most affected by rapid social disruption and technological change—and least prepared for it.”⁵⁹ Needless to say, such comments imply that the members of the PMC were, by contrast, more able to manage (in all senses of the term) this social change. If one wanted to find a “magical” resolution to the crisis in the PMC over the proper role and function of class, one could do worse than propose a narrative that imagined the reassertion of PMC power and control as an apparently inevitable generational changing of the guard. The tale of the rise of auteurist “movie brats” is just such a narrative.

What I am arguing, then, is that we must see the New Hollywood as a pivotal force for—and representative figure of—the cultural reimagining of a resurgent and reinvigorated PMC. By addressing the crisis of the PMC's class legitimacy and reproduction, yet triangulating these concerns through the working class, the youth-cult cycle of films that introduced the New Hollywood to American culture offered a transformed social landscape that imagined the key opposition to be one between youth and the working class. Auteurism served not only as the discourse that informed these representations but also as the industrial practice that offered a model of renewed PMC authority in the workplace. Furthermore, auteurism offered a revalorization of the cultural capital on which the PMC's validity depends. By articulating its class identities with generational accents, New Hollywood practitioners argued for the dominance of their PMC-centric productions and production strategies through the naturalizing rhetoric of generational change. In short, the story of American auteurism is one that cannot be told without acknowledging that auteurism was both the product of and a key player in the class struggles of the New Hollywood and those of U.S. culture at large.

Notes

I would like to thank Sara Blair, Rita Felski, Eric Lott, Richard Maltby, and the two anonymous readers for *Cinema Journal* for their helpful comments and suggestions.

1. David A. Cook, "Auteur Cinema and the 'Film Generation' in 1970s Hollywood," in Jon Lewis, ed., *The New American Cinema* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 35, and Timothy Corrigan, "Auteurs and the New Hollywood," in Lewis, *New American Cinema*, 40.
2. Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," in Pat Walker, ed., *Between Labor and Capital* (Boston: South End Press, 1979), 12. The debates, both in and outside the Marxist tradition, concerning the question of the "new middle classes"—especially whether they are to be considered a separate class or merely a secondary development of either capital or labor—are too extensive to be addressed here. For a useful introduction, see the other essays in *Between Labor and Capital*, as well as Erik Olin Wright, Phillipe Van Parijs, and Peter F. Meiksins, *The Debate on Classes* (New York: Verso, 1989).
3. Rather than discussing auteurism as a policy of textual interpretation, I am referring to the discourse's normative claim that the director should exert primary control over a film's production.
4. Quoted in Michael Pye and Lynda Myles, *The Movie Brats: How the Film Generation Took over Hollywood* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1979), 9.
5. A. D. Murphy, "Students: Stay out of Hollywood," *New York Times*, August 18, 1968, II: 13.
6. Robert Gessner, "Youth Locked out at the Film Gate," *Variety*, January 6, 1965, 25.
7. John Gardiner, "The Below-the-Line Unions," *Television*, December 1967, 44; "The Things Workers Say about the IATSE," *Television*, December 1967, 49; and Joseph Morgenstern, "Hollywood: Myth, Fact, and Trouble," *Newsweek*, June 30, 1969, 86.
8. "The Entertainment Unions: A Progress Report," *Monthly Labor Review* 88, no. 11 (November 1965): 3–4.
9. See Pye and Myles, *The Movie Brats*, 60–61.
10. Joseph Gelmis, *The Film Director as Superstar* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 30.
11. "Screen Actors Guild Moves for Withdrawals from Non-Union 'Swope,'" *Variety*, October 23, 1968, 16, and "Actors Go 'Underground' at Own Peril," *Variety*, March 12, 1969, 5.
12. "'Easy Rider' Biz Sparks NABET Use by Coast Indies," *Variety*, October 22, 1969, 6. The last practice—NABET's encroachment on IATSE's jurisdiction—resulted in a situation of "dual unionism," which, of course, tends to favor employers, who can then play the two unions against each other and thus undermine the bargaining power of each union.
13. Dave Kaufman, "Coast Unemployment Gloom: Inventory High; O'seas a Factor," *Variety*, July 9, 1969, 7, and "H'wood's Production Slump Sparks Record Drop in Craft Employment," *Variety*, January 21, 1970, 5.
14. "Okay Half Wages, under 50G Budget," *Variety*, August 20, 1969, 5.
15. Dave Kaufman, "Creaky Rules and Featherbeds: Coast Crafts' Self-Appraisal," *Variety*, February 18, 1970, 24.
16. "H'wood Craft Unions Dissatisfied with IATSE Concessions; Prod. Lags," *Variety*, June 24, 1970, 4, and Ronald Gold, "Never-Be-the-Same IATSE: Close Votes and Wide Discontent," *Variety*, July 29, 1970, 7, 22.

17. Quoted in Gelmis, *The Film Director as Superstar*, 31.
18. Dale Pollock, *Skywalking: The Life and Films of George Lucas* (New York: Harmony Books, 1983), 100. On PMC labor, see Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 260–63.
19. “H’wood’s New Breed of ‘Personal’ Films Has Corporate Angle: Modest Budgets,” *Variety*, June 25, 1969, 3.
20. Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders and Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock ‘n Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 90.
21. Of course, the New Left and the counterculture were overlapping yet distinct, and occasionally antagonistic, social formations. Yet they stood in for each other in most representations in contemporaneous popular culture. See, for example, Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987), 195–241.
22. Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, “The Professional-Managerial Class,” 31, 34.
23. Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*, 58.
24. *Joe* and *Five Easy Pieces* were listed tenth and thirteenth, respectively, among the films with the highest domestic rentals during 1970. Most other youth-cult films, by contrast, did relatively poorly at the box office. David A. Cook, *History of the American Cinema*, vol. 9, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970–1979* (New York: Scribner’s, 2000), 171, 497–98.
25. “Workers’ Woodstock,” *Time*, June 1, 1970, 12–13.
26. Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*, 107, and Peter B. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 61.
27. Homer Bigart, “War Foes Here Attacked by Construction Workers: City Hall Is Stormed,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1970, late ed., 10; emphasis added.
28. Richard Rogin, “Joe Kelly Has Reached His Boiling Point,” in William H. Chafe and Harvard Sitkoff, eds., *A History of Our Time: Readings on Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 279, 285; originally published in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, June 28, 1970, 12–24.
29. “Almost overnight, ‘hardhats’ became synonymous with white working-class conservatives, already familiar among George Wallace’s 1968 supporters.” “The Sudden Rising of the Hardhats,” *Time*, May 25, 1970, 20–21. Of course, the “Wall Street and Broadway office workers” or “white-collar-and-tie man” to whom Joe Kelly refers could be clerical or “routine mental workers” and thus in some accounts of class position—including the Ehrenreichs’—would be considered members of the working class or proletariat themselves. However, the journalistic accounts of the riots—unattended as they were to Marxist debates concerning the “new middle classes”—tended not to specify the occupations of the nonconstruction workers. The distinction between “blue” and “white” collar tends to serve as a crude mainstream tool for distinguishing between the working and middle classes. Therefore, according to the media’s own class terminology, the riots were a cross-class affair, although they were not described as such. For a useful schematic diagram of the various Marxist positions regarding the taxonomy of the new middle classes, see figure 1 in Val Burris, “Class Structure and Political Ideology,” *Insurgent Sociologist* 14, no. 2 (summer 1987): 33, reprinted in John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 123.
30. In an interview, actor Peter Boyle noted that *Joe* was made “way before Kent State or Jackson State or the construction workers beating up the kids on Wall Street,” yet he acknowledged that “the minute I heard about [the hard hat riots], I knew it was going to affect the way the movie was received.” Judy Klemesrud, “His Happiness Is a Thing Called *Joe*,” *New York Times*, August 2, 1970, II: 9.

31. Gary Arnold, rev. of *Joe*, in David Denby, ed., *Film 70/71* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 43.
32. See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).
33. See, for example, Arnold, rev. of *Joe*, 46, and Pauline Kael, "Numbing the Audience," in *Film 70/71*, 295.
34. "The Hard Hats," *Newsweek*, May 25, 1970, 34; Andy Logan, "Around City Hall," *New Yorker*, June 6, 1970, 104; and lead editorial, *New York Times*, May 9, 1970, 24.
35. Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (New York: Verso, 1988), 86.
36. Michael Everett, personal communication, August 16, 1999.
37. Axel Madsen, *The New Hollywood: American Movies in the '70s* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1975), 136, 6.
38. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s*, 166.
39. Of course, it could be argued that *Five Easy Pieces* is only tangentially about a generational conflict and thus does not address this conflict as directly as *Joe* does. I will merely note here that the context of the film's release—coming, as it did, during the deluge of youth-cult films—made some of the connections between the conflicts played out in the film and those identified with generational disputes more emphatic for the film's viewers. Furthermore, since *Five Easy Pieces* was made by the same young production team (BBS) responsible for *Easy Rider* and starred one of that film's break-out performers, Jack Nicholson, reviewers tended to read *Five Easy Pieces* as affiliated with a youthful, countercultural ethos. For example, *Time*'s Stefan Kanfer characterizes Bobby as the "older brother of the easy riders of 1969" and *Five Easy Pieces* as "an undrugged, mature version" of the aforementioned countercultural landmark. Kanfer, "Supergypsy," rev. of *Five Easy Pieces*, *Time*, September 14, 1970, 89.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Peter Wollen, "Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent d'Est*," in Philip Rosen, ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 121.
42. See, for example, Thomas Elsaesser, "The Pathos of Failure: American Films in the '70s," *Monogram* 6 (1975): 13–19, which discusses *Five Easy Pieces*, and Steve Neale, "New Hollywood Cinema," *Screen* 17, no. 2 (1976): 117.
43. Jacob Brackman, rev. of *Five Easy Pieces*, in *Film 70/71*, 34, 38.
44. Richard Schickel, "A Man's Journey into His Past," rev. of *Five Easy Pieces*, *Life*, September 18, 1970, 16.
45. Brackman, rev. of *Five Easy Pieces*, 34.
46. Penelope Gilliatt, "Study of an American Black Sheep," rev. of *Five Easy Pieces*, *New Yorker*, September 19, 1970, 101.
47. Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*, 75.
48. Midge Decter, *Liberal Parents, Radical Children* (New York: Coward, McGann, & Geoghegan, 1975), 16, 31, 27.
49. In his otherwise positive review of the film, Brackman registers disappointment over this class-specific denouement: "The piano? Is that all?" (38).
50. As Gregg M. Campbell notes, in more ways than one, the Tammy Wynette songs in *Five Easy Pieces* frequently "provide a Greek Chorus for all of Rayette Dipesto's hopes, aspirations, and fears." Campbell, "Beethoven, Chopin, and Tammy Wynette: Heroines and Archetypes in *Five Easy Pieces*," *Film/Literature Quarterly* 2 (1974): 278.
51. Joseph Morgenstern, "Easy Piece, Hard Piece," *Newsweek*, December 21, 1970, 14.

52. As Janet Staiger reminds us, by 1970 such art cinema–influenced techniques had been consistently associated with “high-brow” culture for more than a decade. Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of the American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 178–95.
53. Stanley Kauffman, rev. of *Five Easy Pieces*, *New Republic*, September 26, 1970, 21.
54. John Simon, rev. of *Five Easy Pieces*, in *Film 70/71*, 42, 41.
55. Quoted in “The New Movies,” *Newsweek*, December 7, 1970, 64. Sara Blair has reminded me that Williams’s reference to “aborigines” bears more than a little relationship to the anti-Semitism that attended the popular understanding of the studio heads of the classical era.
56. As a 1971 study commissioned by the Motion Picture Association of America demonstrated, the young viewers who accounted for nearly two-thirds of the moviegoing audience made up less than one-third of the general population. In addition, there was an almost direct relationship between education (which is itself roughly correlated with income) and film attendance: about one-third of college-educated viewers were regular (more than once a month) moviegoers, while 65 percent of those with less than a high school education claimed never to go to the movies at all. Richard Schickel reasoned that this shift in audience composition would mean that movies would “soon be more or less exclusively directed” toward “an elite,” a “New Class . . . who are custodians (or, perhaps, prisoners) of the technostructure.” As a result, Schickel argued, film could no longer be considered the “art of the masses” as it once was (television, he remarked, had usurped that position). Instead, movies had to be understood to be “the playthings of The New Class.” Schickel, “The New Movies,” 62; Richard F. Shepard, “Effect of TV on Moviegoing Is Examined,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1971, 20; Schickel, “The Movies Are Now High Art,” *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, January 5, 1969, 34.
57. Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, 75.
58. Madsen, *The New Hollywood*, 136.
59. “The Blue Collar Worker’s Lowdown Blues,” *Time*, November 9, 1970, 68.