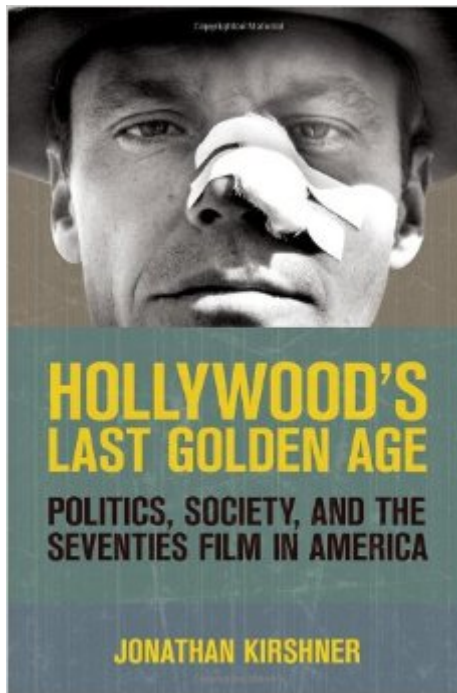


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# Hollywood's Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, And The Seventies Film In America



## Synopsis

Between 1967 and 1976 a number of extraordinary factors converged to produce an uncommonly adventurous era in the history of American film. The end of censorship, the decline of the studio system, economic changes in the industry, and demographic shifts among audiences, filmmakers, and critics created an unprecedented opportunity for a new type of Hollywood movie, one that Jonathan Kirshner identifies as the "seventies film." In *Hollywood's Last Golden Age*, Kirshner shows the ways in which key films from this period—including *Chinatown*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *The Graduate*, and *Nashville*, as well as underappreciated films such as *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, *Klute*, and *Night Moves*—were important works of art in continuous dialogue with the political, social, personal, and philosophical issues of their times. These "seventies films" reflected the era's social and political upheavals: the civil rights movement, the domestic consequences of the Vietnam war, the sexual revolution, women's liberation, the end of the long postwar economic boom, the Shakespearean saga of the Nixon Administration and Watergate. Hollywood films, in this brief, exceptional moment, embraced a new aesthetic and a new approach to storytelling, creating self-consciously gritty, character-driven explorations of moral and narrative ambiguity. Although the rise of the blockbuster in the second half of the 1970s largely ended Hollywood's embrace of more challenging films, Kirshner argues that seventies filmmakers showed that it was possible to combine commercial entertainment with serious explorations of politics, society, and characters' interior lives.

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## Customer Reviews

When I was in high school, my friends and I would go into Boston almost every weekend to see a movie. A new film directed by Mike Nichols or starring Dustin Hoffman would be an important event. The times were changing and this seemed somehow normal in our adolescent worldview. The movies not only reflected and reinforced those transformations but they put people our age on the right side of change and made us feel less alone and somehow superior. This was "the decade when movies mattered." Going to the movies has never been as important to me as during this time and, for the last thirty years or so, I have been vaguely dissatisfied in my experience viewing films. In a brief but well argued 200 pages, Jonathan Kirshner explains at last why this is so. The period 1965-1975 constitutes for Kirshner a distinct and identifiable era of cinema. Movies in this period were transformed from linear stories with unambiguous morals to "self-consciously gritty explorations of complex episodes that challenged the received normative structure of society." The origin of this transition was based in multiple factors. The end of Hollywood censorship freed the form while industry changes gave opportunities to new and younger filmmakers. Significant social and political upheaval shocked institutional foundations creating novel avenues for questioning values. The history of the film craft influenced new approaches. French New Wave directors brought a more personal, less polished style to subjects often critical of authority while American noir films from another transitional period (1945-1955) focused on the underside of American affluence and power. The result was a decade of character driven films often with a political text or subtext including an emphasis on moral ambiguity.

Kirschner proposes that as Hollywood was liberated from censorship that required moral certainty, (good guys and bad guys,) the serious directors, writers, and actors confronted moral ambiguity which was previously taboo. Now the subject of film was subject to debate. Starting his prologue with a tale from his youth on the joy of debating about films, ( "arguments like these were rarely resolved, but they were not really meant to be") the author identifies his idea of great film-- its ability to engage, to raise questions, to make you talk loud and long about it. Simultaneously with the end of the Hollywood Codes, political events and social changes in the 1960's engaged moral concerns. In the movies, as in life, the evenly illuminated world of 1950's transformed gradually into a murkier place with shadows, uncertain identities, unheroic protagonists, ambiguous goals and outcomes. Kirchner's social history writing is vivid-- one understands the rising hopes and the devastating disappointments of the era that saw the Civil Rights Act passed, the assassination of powerful moral leaders RFK, MLK, the exposure of contemptuous and deceitful leaders in the release of the

Pentagon Papers and the Watergate revelations. More lively and passionate are his succinct analyses of films from 1967-1976. There are about 20 he reads closely. He makes a compelling case that this was an era clearly set off from its surround, in which Hollywood's major successful products had characteristic intellectual concerns, visual and narrative innovations, that were tightly linked to the social and political developments of that period.

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