Critical and Ideological Analysis of 1960s American Films

Análisis crítico e ideológico de películas estadounidenses de la década de 1960

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ABSTRACT

The films produced during the sixties of the twentieth century reflect the major events that took place during that period through indirect and implicit codes, symbols, cultural messages, and ideological thoughts. The use of symbolic and ideological messages and suggestive scenes accentuates the complexity of understanding those films critically and historically. This paper critically studies the profound cultural and ideological meanings and messages of some representative key films of the 1960s in America, such as Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964), John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), and Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969).

Keywords: Codes, cognitive, ideology, violence

RESUMEN

Las películas producidas durante los años sesenta del siglo XX reflejan los principales acontecimientos que tuvieron lugar durante ese período a través de códigos indirectos e implícitos, símbolos, mensajes culturales y pensamientos ideológicos. El uso de los mensajes simbólicos e ideológicos y las escenas sugerentes acentúa la complejidad de entender esas películas crítica e históricamente. Este artículo estudia críticamente los profundos significados culturales e ideológicos y los mensajes de algunas películas clave representativas de la década de 1960 en Estados Unidos, como *Marnie de Hitchcock* (1964), *Midnight Cowboy* de John Schlesinger (1969) y *Easy Rider* (1969) de Dennis Hopper.

Palabras clave: Codigos, cognitivo, ideologia, violencia

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INTRODUCTION

American cinema in the 1960s has been a rich and intensive source of historical and social materials on various levels. One of the most important issues that the American screen tried to probe is the ideology that reflects the nature of the age itself and the spirit of the conflictual society regarding the ideological and sociological perspectives of the American people living at that time. In this paper, the researchers endeavor to study a few selected representative films that played a significant role in revealing some of the implicit ideologies that these people strongly believe in. It is also essential to look at these films from a structural lens in order to understand the representations of ideology through codes, images, symbols, and messages.

It is widely believed that films have a tremendous effect on people's lives and the way they perceive reality. It affects their views and conceptions about themselves and about society as well. No one can deny the fact that classic films have played a vital role in people's life since they depict and feature various historical and social implications. Some of these implications are embedded in the form of ideological messages and suggestive cultural symbols, and some others are explicitly expressed in the form of apparent scenarios and dialogues that directly and easily reach the audience without any effort (Isenberg & Isenberg: 2009).

Films can historically and culturally document any time period. Though they are usually considered a tremendous source of entertainment and amusement to the public, their informative ideological messages are the most crucial ones that concern the researchers and critics of all times. The films of the 1960s were not only a form of media, art, and entertainment, but also a manifestation of the uprisings and events, including various and ramified sociological and ideological aspects (Tudor: 2013).

In order to better understand the underlying mental and cognitive images that function as ideological signifiers, it is useful to study Marnie, a film directed by Hitchcock and released in 1964. This film is a good representation of the psychological and mental problems of the age, especially women's suffering, which caused many psychological problems for them. The same issues can be seen in many other films released at that time, such as Hitchcock's Vertigo (1958) and The Psycho (1960) by the same director.

Marnie, the main protagonist in Marnie, is a woman who suffers from many psychological problems because of the bad childhood she had lived. The complexity of her character is a mystery throughout the whole movie. Viewers will be able to understand and reveal this mystery only at the end of the movie. By doing so, they will be able to relate this movie with the other movies in the period. All these movies deal with the dilemmas that women face when they struggle hard to make their voices louder. Viewers will not discover Marine's secret, which causes her fears and phobias, until the end of the movie. Marnie's phobia reflects the prevailing social problems in the 1960s, especially violence and women abuse, whether it is sexual, physical, or verbal abuse. (Moral: 2013, Johnson: 1964, pp. 38-42)

Marnie, in Hitchcock's Marnie, and Bonnie in Bonnie and Clyde, are all victims of society. They are driven by the males to become criminals. There are big differences between them, but both have a negative social background that is psychologically painful and tormenting, driving them into behaving in an insane and eccentric way. Marnie's eccentric social and psychological behavior reflects the residuals and the consequences of war and violence on both the family structure and the social relationships that can be described as shaky and unreliable. It is also important to note here that the phobias and the psychological disorders that Hitchcock refers to in most of his movies embody the fear of violence and war and the painful and violent past (Schwanebeck: 2017, pp. 1-17).

Marine's phobia introduces a controversial point since it reminds viewers of Hitchcock's The Psycho and Vertigo, which also pose a substantial view about the age from the psychological and personal view of the director. It might not be important to find out if these films really reflect an accurate image of the reality that people were living at that time. The researchers argue that it is more important to find out the historical view that these films introduce to the audience. In Hitchcock's Motives, Michael Walker refers to the theme of

childhood and repression in Marnie. He explains, "In Marnie, the melodramatic material lies not in the heroine's fears of her social and domestic inadequacies as a wife, but in her own disturbed psyche. Accordingly, dreams and free association become the pathways to uncovering the nature of the disturbance, which stems from repressed childhood trauma." (Walker: 2005, pp. 496-503).

METHODOLOGY

Marnie contains an intense and condensed experience that is teemed with the mental images which appear to viewers as fragments or flashbacks. The essential part is the amount of the flowing emotions that come out from the unconscious mind. Every word, scene, and an image carries an unexpressed feeling. It is moving in terms of the cathartic effects created in the viewers' minds. Every scene proposes an acute sense of pain, reminding the viewers of the psychological trauma the child (Marnie) once lived. The interaction between the film as a visual text and the viewers is quite high due to the elements of suspense and tension the director brilliantly uses in the film. Wood refers to this idea in his book Hitchcock's Films Revisited, he explains:

Though identification patterns in Marine are more complex than in Psycho or the first half of Vertigo, it is broadly true that we are made for sharing Marine's tensions throughout the film. Suspense is always used to convey the constant strain under which she lives so that the extreme points of her tension are the extreme points of ours. We share, too, then, her first moment of genuine relaxation, when Mark brings her Forio; above all, we share her sense of release, at the image of the blood-soaked shirt that fills the whole screen, fulfilling and hence exorcising the intimations of unknown horror given by the red suffusions.

From Wood's description of Marine's tensions throughout the film Marnie, one can notice the brilliance of the director who turned the film into a visual image by his use of the element of suspense and very careful description of details (Wood: 2002).

As for the signified and ideological messages, the researchers briefly studied Easy Rider, a film released in 1969 and directed by Dennis Hopper. Even though the film looks absurd from a superficial denotative surface, it is ideologically, socially, and thematically rich from a connotative level. It represents some important aspects of the American culture that were prevailing during the 1960s, such as the Hippies movement. Away from the fragmented stream of consciousness that makes up a series of ambiguous signs, the film remains a powerful attempt to represent the idea of the American dream (Batsakis: 2019, Hopper: 1969). The ambiguity of the film's approach to representing the American dream seems to be similar to Fitzgerald's approach to the American dream in The Great Gatsby. The American dream is represented as ambiguous and mysterious in both works that end up in a frustrating imaginative point because the viewers never see the protagonists' dreams come true. Part of the significance of this film is its realistic approach to the social and political conditions of the age. In addition, it also tackles the issue of the American dream by referring to multiple and ramified themes such as freedom, materialistic wealth, and peace. The film is portrayed as a fantasy represented in a stream of consciousness technique, which actually goes in line with the spirit of the age when people, especially youth, were looking for a new peaceful start after the war and all the other political and social upheavals. At that time, people began to fantasize about their dreams of freedom, happiness, and individualism. One of the important ideas to emphasize in this regard is that individualism began to be represented as a journey into the city and industrial world, leaving the old traditions, conventions, and the past behind. In his article entitled "A Lyric, Tragic Song of the Road," Schickel refers to the historical significance of the movie. He states:

Easy Rider is, in the smallest sociological sense, a historical movie. "In it, motorcycles are for the first time on-screen converted from a malignant to a benign symbol, and the kids who ride them are seen not as vandals or threats to the establishment but as innocent individualists in desperate unavailing flight from the system" (44), then the writer continues to refer to the idea of the generation gap that the film is trying to signify, he says "but then the endless of cycle-gang pictures to which we have been subjected in recent years is also an exaggeration, a commercialized compound of the worst figments of our most dismal imaginings about what is going on across the generation gap. At the very least, Easy Rider is a useful corrective. At its inconsistent best, it is an attempt to restate, in vivid, contemporary terms, certain ageless American preoccupations."

From this description of Easy Rider by Schickel, it is clear that the film is very rich in its historical significance. It gives the viewers a very accurate idea about the main "American preoccupations" during the 1960s.

The idea of the generation gap that Schickel talks about can also be found in The Graduate, a film directed by Mike Nichols in 1976. Though the film was produced during the 1970s, it discusses almost the same issues that people suffer from during the 1960s. The film depicts how the gap between generations is conveyed through family and society relationships, which are obviously depicted as gaps between the young and the elderly. The film is not much different from Easy Rider in terms of its central focus on the dreams of youth and the gap that modern transformations of the age created in the 1960s for people, including the ideological, social, and political transformations. The Graduate is an entertaining film to watch; it does not leave that cathartic effect that the other movies in the 60s leave on the audience, but the film suggests a wide spectrum of thoughts and ideas which make us think of the dynamics of the sixties (Hogg: 2019, pp. 89-122).

The church scene is one of the most powerful and influential scenes in this film because it evokes many ideas that are very much related to age. For example, when Benjamin traps the people in the church, he uses a cross to lock the gate of the church, leaving people behind and running away with his girl. This scene, in particular, carries many ideological messages embedded in the visual text that the director tries to show to the viewers. The scene enforces the idea of entrapment on the social, political, ideological, and religious levels. An important question to raise here is about the reason for Benjamin's use of a cross to lock people up. The ambiguity comes from the fact that the scene is supposed to trigger the idea of ideological entrapment. One can see this gap becoming much wider as Benjamin and his girl starts to run away from the church and then get in the bus moving away from their people.

The idea of escape is so much repeated and frequent in most films in the sixties. Many scenes depict a parallel line with the messages they endeavor to send out. This is an important idea related to the change that people needed to have in the sixties when stifling conditions of political and social archetypes had exhausted the spirit of the age, and the youth found themselves in a real need of substantial reform and change. Schickel says, "The occasion for these geriatric musings is The Graduate, a film which starts out to satirize the alienated spirit of modern youth, does so with uncommon brilliance for its first half, but ends up selling out to the very spirit of its creators intended to make fun of. Its protagonist, Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman), is introduced as the archetype of youthful angst" (Schickel & Simon: 1968).

The idea of entrapment within a small space is used as a symbolic code in Cool Hand Luke, a film directed by Stuart Rosenberg in 1967. The film tells a story of a person named Luke who was sentenced to two years in prison. Luke's behaviors made him a real hero in the eyes of his fellow prisoners who were suffering in prison. He had a free strong spirit that attracted the prisoners. Luke attempts to escape several times, but he always fails. Every time he flees, he is recaptured again and taken back to prison. Finally, he is shot by the police while he was in the church, asking God to free and save him from his predicament and misery (Reynolds: 1997).

RESULTS

The film, in fact, depicts a harsh reality of life in the 1960s when hope was the only dream of salvation. The film's sad ending makes a shocking scene for the audience simply because they seem to sympathize with Luke as he had to endure that suffering while he was in jail but enjoying that persistent free spirit. The film is ironic and critical of the social and political life at that time. Just as The Graduate, the film criticizes the social aspects and poses a skeptical point against ideology. Both The Graduate and Cool Hand Luke have the church scene that poses the idea of the entrapment as a symbolic code of culture and ideology within the place. There is a tremendous focus on the idea of "miscommunication," which also represents the gap mentioned earlier in The Graduate and in The Easy Rider. The director creates a sense of challenge in Luke's character that keeps asking for freedom until the very end; even when he dies, we see that smile on his face. Wilfrid Sheed refers to Luke's smile in "Burton, Taylor, and The Taming of the Shrew" and says," the only footage the movie puts wrong is right at the end, when we are vouchsafed some close-ups of Newman's indomitable smile, showing that such a man being killed but not defeated, or vice versa" (Hunt: 2020, pp. 105-125, Whitehead: 2014). Everything in the film provokes ideological ideas. All scenes present enigmatic and symbolic codes that can only be explained by the viewers themselves. Even the smile on Luke's face has many hidden messages.

Speaking of violence and aggression, one of the major things that these films share is their subtle representation of the dilemma of the voice of the woman in the 1960s, which was struggling to force its way in the society. Feminism is one of the key aspects in most of these films that represent the political and social turmoil that came as a reaction to the general masculine bias against feminism. These films pose a fundamental treatment of the way feminism was looked at during that time. While one can't take for granted that these films represent an exact reflection of the age, they give a clear idea about the reaction against feminism, which was as violent as any other reaction against all the major events of the age. Also, violence in its various forms is clearly represented in the films of the sixties. For example, Peckinpah's films meet the conflicting spirit of the age. In Screening Violence, Prince notes, "Peckinpah hoped to convey the horror of violence to viewers he believed had been rendered complacent by decades of painless, bloodless movie killings." (Prince: 2001). Thus, Peckinpah had made significant changes to the techniques of the film's montage and editing; one of these changes is the slow-motion, which matches the visual perceptions of domestic and war violence. For example, Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch represents sheer violence. According to Bani Khair and others, " Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch is one of the films that primarily deal with violence and its representation within the framework of the social, historical, and cultural aspects of the society in the 1960s in America" (Bani-Khair et al.:2017, pp. 210-214). Also, there is a huge concentration on the visual elements that depict woman's dilemmas within the broader circle of violence.

Midnight Cowboy is a film released in 1969 and directed by John Schlesinger. It is one of the suggestive films that frame the concept of the American dream and its philosophical associations at the end of the 1960s. The film is about a person named Joe Buck, who works as a dishwasher in a restaurant in Texas. He finds that his dreams as a nice-looking cowboy, who can have love relations with rich women in New York, can become true if he travels to New York and abandons the traditional rural life. Then he meets a person named Ratso, and they became friends after some fight and quarrels, but they both find that they share similar dreams from the past. By the end of the film, they are shocked by the reality of life, which stops their youthful dreams, but they go on to travel somewhere else.

This film brought a new shadow on the history of American culture because it simultaneously shows conflicting images from different slices of American life. Joe, the main character, seems to provide a contradictory image of both; a new city life and a traditional life that has totally changed. His character makes huge juxtapositions and contradictions; past and future, hope and despair, rural and urban life, dreams, and the death of dreams. This film is a more reliable representation of the decade since the director shows diverse

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images of life in the period. Other films, like The Wild Bunch, heavily rely on western themes. This film combines two paradoxes that give a dual perception of the reality and unreality of the American culture in the 1960s. So, one can say that the film is a social representation more than anything else.

DISCUSSION

While the problem of the stylized violence is powerfully represented in a distinctly western style, one can see in Midnight Cowboys that such themes are also represented in a completely different style using different montage editing, new techniques, new settings, and new styles that revolutionize the traditions and conventions of the film industry in both its content and style. Midnight Cowboy is an excellent representation of the mainstream events in a more approachable and understandable way, which provokes the imagination of the audience regarding the main events at that time. The major theme in this film is that American culture began to be free from the stereotypes and conventions that the director refers to as the cowboy character, which struggles to fit in New York City. So, one can argue that the 1960s is the period when lifestyles began to change because of people's visions and dreams, which also began to change.

Midnight Cowboy gives clues to the new powerful ways American culture began to take by accepting the idea of change itself. Joe's new journey from Texas to New York can be seen as a change that addresses the way people accept changes in their lifestyle. Joe's attempts to survive in the city is an embracement of a new life that foreshadows completely different lifestyles. From the researchers' point of view, the reason why the director juxtaposes the cowboy to the city life is that city life appears as a kind of more freedom that carries the dreams and aspirations of people. This is why this film provides a clear reflection of the idea of the American dream itself, which was stronger by the end of the 1960s, after the war had extensively exhausted the spirit of the age, in addition to the political and social turmoil that took place at that time.

Midnight Cowboy receives a warm welcome from people at that time because it reminded them of the new life they should embrace, and probably because it marks a new page in the American culture. Women, for example, seem to have a stronger voice that veers away from that naïve and dominated picture of women, like the one presented in The Wild Bunch and many other westerns. Rather, it represents the women whose voice can discuss, criticize and negotiate, and this is likely to be the voice of feminism when it began to be accepted by the end of the 1960s. Like the "bus scene" when Joe was talking to a woman with her child, the woman with the child gives a good picture of a modern, civilized woman who is well educated enough to silence and interrupt Joe when he didn't stop speaking. This is a more powerful way of showing how women began to stand in the middle, and their voice reaches all slices of the society in America.

The 1960s was the period when a modern life began to be introduced for people and when males and females began to realize the importance of a new modern life away from violence. As one can notice from the film, the change that Joe has to accept is not only related to the lifestyle he has to have in the city world, but also the ideology, thoughts, conceptions, sociality, and practicality. One of the effective techniques that the director adds in this film is the "flashback techniques," which enable the protagonists to see and compare the life they once lived with the new demands and changes of a new life they aspire to. This flashback technique is particularly important because it emphasizes the importance of connecting the past with the future, the light with the shadows, and the new with the old.

While the protagonist in the film finds it difficult to have a place in a new society where things impose change, one can see the purpose of this film, which tries to show how one's pursuit of identity is a real problem within the American culture. Identity displacement is one of the themes that correlate with this issue since it anticipates the extent of success for Meckier to establish his old identity in a new open, multicultural place (Meckier: 1984, pp. 266-277). In his essay, Arthur Schlesinger states:

Midnight Cowboy is John (no relative) Schlesinger's first film shot in America. One feels in it the exhilaration of an imaginative director suddenly plunged into a new world of exotic sights and sounds. The concept of the American bus trip, for example, gives the film its frame. In a bravura beginning, the bus carries the cowboy from Texas to New York. The mood is lyrical though enigmatic, charged with glowing impressions of the past and hopes for the future. In the end, another bus carries the cowboy and his dying New York friend from the shadows of Manhattan to the sunlight of Miami. The mood is somber but now lucid; the time of the illusions has gone.

Schlesinger also refers to the new montage editing and styles that the director made in this film. He says in the same article:

Moreover, he goes wild on what used to be called montage: the dissolution of linear narration into a whirl of images. Such impressionism can, of course, be tremendously effective in conveying states of mind and emotion, and John Schlesinger uses it well to deal with the power of memory and fantasy in the lives of his protagonists. But he uses it too often. At first, this is merely irritating. Then it becomes evident that it is not only self-indulgent but represents an escape from harder problems of characterization and structure. If only Schlesinger's directorial self-discipline had matched his luminous sense of scene and his extraordinary skill in handling actors, this would have been a far more considerable film (Pontecorvo et al.: 1966).

So, Midnight Cowboy is one of the most important films that represent the 1960s. It is very effective in conveying the characters' states of mind and emotion. The researchers agree with Schlesinger, who says at the end of the passage mentioned above that, just like any other film, there are always many things that the director can make to make Midnight Cowboy much better. This, however, should not underestimate the importance of this film. (Kirshner: 2018, pp. 58-60).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is essential to understand the profound cultural and ideological meanings and hidden messages of these representative key films of the 1960s in America. Keeping in mind the historical and social aspects of these films, the researchers looked at these films from a different angle. These films reveal some essential cultural, social, political, and psychological perspectives of the 1960s, perspectives that deeply and implicitly exist within the underlying connotative structure of the visual text. Evidently, the film industry in the 1960s was a product of the age and a representation of realities, events, hopes, and aspirations of people as individuals and societies because they function as records for history and culture during that period. So, this paper shows how the films of the sixties can be considered to be a reflection of the dynamics and realities which echo the major events that took place during that period. The films' directors make use of many indirect and implicit codes and symbols that refer to specific events and main features of the age and reveal many of its ideological and visual messages.

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