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# THE MESSAGE AND THE MOVIES

## CINEMA AS IDEOLOGY

### Week 6: Paranoia and the Pictures

- The 70s also bought us the anti-hero and the accompanying sense of nihilism.
- No doubt bought on by a collapsing trust of authority and a growing feeling that the American dream may well be dead on its feet.
- Unlike the brasher, more colorful razzmatazz of the following decade, much of the 70s was spent examining why the 60s and its promise of new hope and free love had simply turned into a ghastly vomit-inducing hangover.

#### The Paranoid Conspiracy Thriller

- These undoubtedly entertaining, yet desperately sweaty and suspicious celluloid hammer blows reflected the growing public unease with once-trusted government offices, in light of the very real conspiracy of the Watergate affair.

#### *Soylent Green* (1973)

Richard Fleischer

- Based on the novel *Make Room! Make Room!* by Harry Harrison
  - Police procedural and science fiction
  - Examines over population - lack of resources food etc.

*'Food is so short that the population has become derelict, crowded into empty churches where they are fed by charity and dressed in drab colours.'*

Shipman, D. (1985), p.118

#### American Zoetrope

- Founded by Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas
- It came out of a desire to 'subvert' the studio system, which felt restrictive
- The idea was to produce mainstream films to generate funds for more experimental projects
- Coppola was an integral part of the 'New Hollywood' alongside George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma, Terence Mallick, Robert Altman, Woody Allen and William Friedkin

#### *The Conversation* (1974)

Francis Ford Coppola

##### Premise/set up

- Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) is a surveillance expert with his own business
- He is unnaturally obsessed with his own privacy whilst spending his working life spying on other people's lives
- He is tasked with recording the secret conversation of a young couple
- However, Harry begins to fear the consequences of what will happen if he hands over the tapes – he previously caused the death of three people with his clandestine bugging techniques
- Even though he is defensive about his profession – he is also wracked by Catholic guilt
- The film sinks deeper into a paranoid mess of 'who is watching who?'

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## *The Conversation* (1974) CONT...

### Significance of the Name

#### Caul

- The amniotic membrane enclosing a fetus.

### The Watergate Scandal

- The Watergate scandal happened when United States President Richard Nixon, a Republican, was tied to a crime in which former FBI and CIA agents broke into the offices of the Democratic Party and George McGovern (the Presidential candidate).
- Nixon's helpers listened to phone lines and secret papers were stolen.
- Even though the script was written before the Watergate scandal, the paranoia of the situation, seeped into the film's brooding atmosphere
- The surveillance techniques used in the film, were remarkably close to those used in Watergate

### Themes

- Surveillance versus participation
- Perception versus reality

### Gene Hackman

- Gene Hackman had to reach deep to really get under the skin of the character – Caul was so different to his own persona
- According to Coppola, Hackman became grumpy and uncomfortable on set, such was his difficulty in getting to grips with the role.
- However, Hackman later claimed it was one of his favourite performances

*'The screenplay is as exact and focused as Harry himself: from the establishing shot, tracking the circus mime through the crowd, through to details like Harry's caul-like mac, and the times you see him foggily, through something not quite as translucent as it ought to be. The camerawork, nodding to but not mimicking CCTV, has a mechanical pan that unsettles. That white noise jitters your ears, shakes your soul.'*

**Catherine Shoard**

### *Network* (1976)

Sidney Lumet

- *Network* was one of a raft of films which dealt with the moral values of television

### Premise/set up

- Howard Beale, the longtime anchor of the Union Broadcasting System's *UBS Evening News*, learns from friend and news division president Max Schumacher that he has just two more weeks on the air because of declining ratings.
- The following night, Beale announces on live television that he will commit suicide on next Tuesday's broadcast. UBS fires him after this incident.
- Schumacher intervenes so that Beale can have a dignified farewell.
- Once on the air, he launches back into a rant claiming that life is "bullshit."
- Ruthlessly ambitious Diane Christensen (Faye Dunaway) fights her way to a prime position on the Network
- She can see that the future of broadcasting lies in the public's obsession with violence and violence
- She capitalizes on this by developing a TV show centering around a group of actual terrorists

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**Network (1976) CONT...**

- This aspect, as well as many other aspects, are absolutely prescient in terms of how the modern media treats crime/terrorism in an 'if it bleeds it leads' manner
- The commercialization of ideas and idealism and the co-option of the imagination into currency is key to the plot of Network
- The News is just another entertainment show

*'One of Chayefsky's key insights is that the bosses don't much care what you say on TV, as long as you don't threaten their profits. Howard Beale calls for outrage, he advises viewers to turn off their sets, his fans chant about how fed up they are--but he only gets in trouble when he reveals plans to sell the network's parent company to Saudi Arabians.'*

**Roger Ebert**

*'The leading critics (Pauline Kael among them) sneered at Network, but it endures (wide 1970s lapels and all) as a brave, outspoken work.'*

**Philip French**

*'Beale eventually becomes a victim of the corporate media ratings monster, and — well, let's just say it doesn't end well for him. And admittedly, Beale is meant to be the most sympathetic character in the film, fed up and tired with all these corporate shenanigans. The movie is a masterful satire of what happens when journalism is sacrificed for ratings, as well as the instant appeal of angry rants to a wide audience, no matter the ideology behind them. (Sound familiar?)'*

**Vox**

*"...wickedly distorted views of the way television looks, sounds, and, indeed, is, are the satirist's cardiogram of the hidden heart, not just of television but also of the society that supports it and is, in turn, supported."*

**The New York Times**