**Poor Reception, Big Success - Fostering Spectator Identification in New Hollywood**

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Rosenbaum forwards that the period of the 1960s to early 1970s was one characterized by a redefining of “art” in cinema.[[1]](#endnote-1) What emerged in the United States was the film culture of “New Hollywood” - a film culture exemplified by “popularized applications” of European New Wave and US underground filmmaking (henceforth termed here as ‘alternative’ filmmaking/film culture).[[2]](#endnote-2) These popularized applications defined by Rosenbaum defy direct lineages between their application in New Hollywood and antecedents in alternative film culture (with some exceptional cases withstanding).[[3]](#endnote-3) Francis Ford Coppola’s 1974 film, *The Conversation*, utilizes some of the popularized applications of European Art Cinema to render a film text that engages the spectator without disowning the fiction of the narrative for political or social imperatives.

I would like to suggest a metaphor regarding the formation of the film culture of New Hollywood: as the ‘underground’ (alternative film culture) ‘surfaces’, only the surface of it is appropriated by the ‘transforming’ film culture (in this case Hollywood) and only those features which are most permeable are incorporated into the transforming (or adapting) film culture’s mainstream form. Thus, the ‘surface features’ of the underground film culture become a metonym for the new film culture (ie. “youth pics” of New Hollywood). The surface features of the underground (or simply, ’other’) film culture undergo a transformation of their signifieds as they are appropriated by the adapting/transforming film culture. As such, their signifiers experience a shift in modes and methods of expression. This thesis can hopefully begin to explain three phenomena of New Hollywood: the resistance to full expressions of counterculture, a popular belief that the films indeed represented the counterculture, and the fostering of spectator identification through the effect of “poor reception” (ie. the system of privileging secondary over primary identification through incorporation of the auteur‘s voice into secondary identification).

New Hollywood became refined through a trial and error process at the level of exhibition. An important mitigating factor on a film becoming successful with audiences during this time pertains to the film resisting full expressions of the counterculture of the period - specifically an aversion to purporting, propagating and supporting the tenets of the socio-political platforms of that counterculture. Rosenbaum provides the case-in-point of *Zabriskie Point* (1970) as a film which was too direct socio-politically to then have audience appeal in the US.[[4]](#endnote-4) He adds Hopper’s *The Last Movie* (1971) as a film that failed with audiences because it was overly self-referentially critical.[[5]](#endnote-5) Rosenbaum also points out the ’gleaning’ or surface-level incorporation of alternative film culture to New Hollywood in many of its successful first films: *Easy Rider* (1969) and *The Graduate*’s (1967) use of popular music soundtracks or *Taxi Driver*’s (1976) “jamming of styles” where adoption of alternative film culture was strictly reserved for stylistic systems of the film and not the narrative thematic.[[6]](#endnote-6) For Rosenbaum, New Hollywood was required to rely on “subliminal abridgements” for more direct expressions of socio-political dimension of the counterculture of that moment.[[7]](#endnote-7) Rosenbaum provides an explanation for this requirement as pertaining to studio censorship reformed by revisions in the Production Code and its later replacement by the ratings system during the period in question.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In *The Conversation*, the socio-politically charged issues are treated under the heading of “subliminal abridgements” and become more or less referential. The potential lies of the media are contextualized solely within Caul’s delirium and the teamster murders are rendered mere ropes (or an inert frame) on a boxing ring bout where Caul is challenged by the hungry underdog opponent who has been denied by Caul’s personal ethos of secrecy. From a semiotic standpoint, this gleaning of the surface of alternative film culture implies a transformation of the signifieds and thus a re-expression of their signifiers. For Metz, the fiction film’s signifier is employed to remove traces of itself and only has a presence in its mode of denegation (presence-absence).[[9]](#endnote-9) New Hollywood successes are noted by Rosenbaum as privileging secondary identification (character/actor) over primary identification (act of perception/apparatus). Thus, the re-expression of signifiers in New Hollywood films may indeed be thwarting Metz’s understanding of traditional fiction film signifiers and their goals of denegation. The re-expressed signifiers in New Hollywood are employed toward identification with characters as opposed toward primary identification and the subject-position of the Transcendental Subject. The re-expressed signifiers seek to emulate the condition of spectatorship sans Transcendental Subject position through privileging signification at the level of secondary identification and this emulation utilizes all modes of filmic construction (editing, mise-en-scene, sound, etc.).

Rosenbaum notes methodological obstacles (intentional fallacy, omissions, pluralism, market specificity) in providing a detailed exhibition history, and thus a detailed account of how the alternative film culture antecedents to New Hollywood were received by audiences.[[10]](#endnote-10) This impacts a full understanding of the reasons behind spectator identification with New Hollywood films as well. For Rosenbaum, New Hollywood films are often in dialogue with counterculture values without expounding them. The collective rebellion of the counterculture is reflected, but not duplicated by the personal rebellion of protagonists in New Hollywood successes.[[11]](#endnote-11) In effect, this de-politicizing of New Hollywood is in fact its own political credo. Kael further understands New Hollywood as being preconditioned to imitate through a recognition/misrecognition of itself as the source of its sources (yet this attitude irks Rosenbaum).[[12]](#endnote-12) Hence the gleaning aspect of the surface of the alternative film culture fits with Pauline Kael’s understanding. David James also understands New Hollywood as de-radicalizing alternative film culture practices and remarks that “the film [*Easy Rider*, in this instance] remains a pastiche, an essentially orthodox industrial product, decorated with unamalgamated infractions.”[[13]](#endnote-13) If audiences associated many New Hollywood successes with expressions of the counterculture, this is perhaps no great surprise - as Rosenbaum concludes that the borrowing (or gleaning) of the alternative film culture’s existential hero became a perfect vehicle for dislocating the auteur’s voice out of alignment with the position of Transcendental Subject and rendering a film text highly serviceable to spectator identification and thus in most cases, box office success[[14]](#endnote-14).

For Rosenbaum, this relocation of the auteur’s voice into the protagonist position has the effect of shedding moral consequences for the audience.[[15]](#endnote-15) The protagonist controls the action but not his/her external world (the diegetic). The protagonist is free to act to the maximum of their will power because the spectator is consciously free to part from identification with the protagonist at any point and then rationalize the diegetic world from a “truly” Transcendental Subject position… one hinged on conscious engagement over perceptual engagement. This malleability, if you will, fosters a greater degree of spectator identification and thus engagement with the film text. In this arrangement, secondary identification is privileged over primary identification. Primary identification becomes only the frame/screen for the diegesis where conscious and perceptual are now separate and distinct. Can this understanding be married with Metz’s formulation of spectator identification? I believe so, provided there is a reformulation that accounts for an exponentially greater plurality in identification as a result of distinguishing identification based on perception from identification based on consciousness. For example, I see (perception) a world on the screen and notice it has rules and laws, that it is constructed and likely with a purpose (social heuristic). I identify with the world as a ‘possible world’ to which I might go or from which I might have come. Conversely, consciously, I imagine the world on the screen as having extension and being a reflection of my own experience (empirical logic). I identify with the world as being part of myself and one that I might have formed, that I am forming and that I might form (or contribute to the formation of, *et al*.). Provided these distinctions are significant and/or legitimate then identification has more than two modes and exponentially more relationships between them. I propose these ideas and request that they be considered deeply but evaluated in a more cursory and forgiving manner given that it would require far more thought and exercise to properly theorize. It remains a hypothesis at present.

I would now like to propose the concept of “poor reception” and connect it to what has already been outlined in this paper regarding the formal tendencies of New Hollywood and my thesis regarding its superficial incorporation of alternative film culture and the resulting transformation of signifieds and thus re-expression of the signifiers. To understand, this new concept of ‘poor reception’ I would employ a close reading of *The Conversation* (1974). The protagonist of the film, Harry Caul, dominates virtually every frame of the film and he drives the action of the narrative. His dominance even thwarts more basic human desires to which many of the audience would have enjoyed privilege. For example, Caul expresses that he only cares about a good recording and not its content. His singular motivation is what is privileged in the film. The opening shot sets this up nicely by suturing the long zoom shot with a reverse shot of a surveillance technician and thus curbing spectator identification with the Transcendental Subject position. The sound design accents this by rendering all legibility of sound to the subject position and not Transcendental Subject position thus rupturing primary identification in this opening long shot. Later, Caul is not reframed when moving around his apartment. Privilege is key to the story and thus to the spectator’s filmic experience. Fragmentation transcends Caul’s personality into the very mise-en-scene as his sound lab is a mere slice of the entire warehouse to which it is housed. Caul is an alien to his very milieu and this fosters spectator identification through the spectator requiring more knowledge of the film world prior to feeling comfort with immersion in it. The few moments of privileging knowledge are achieved through obscure contexts (a dream, a church confession). The auteur position is held by Harry Caul given that the spectator is provided no privilege from a Transcendental Subject position. The effect is that the spectator privileges an identification with Caul for lack of another suitable option.

Anxiety for a cinematic spectator can be resolved when the option to disengage with a protagonist who does not provide enough privilege in knowledge of the film world to compel absorption into it is available, and thus a “poor reception” effect will be created. Through lacking the privilege of knowledge from the Transcendental Subject position, the spectator has a poor reception of the film world - poor, but not non-existent. The poverty drives the spectator psychologically into demanding more knowledge. The spectator has a pleasure principle at work and a desire to be satisfied. Identification is maintained - provided that the protagonist of the film shares some aspect of this drive for richness and privilege of knowledge. Rosenbaum supports this through his charges against epic flops of films whose protagonists are characterized as having vague personal identities.[[16]](#endnote-16) In the hotel sequence, Caul’s fragmented visions of murder have a greater basis in his dream than the reality of the film world. He passes out and wakes up to a poor reception of a television broadcasting of a Flintstones cartoon mirroring his own obscured consciousness and perception. The long shots from the balcony beg the question about different modes of surveillance and the limits of Caul’s knowledge. They foreground his ignorance, his lack of privilege… even his awareness of the fact. The company having their own surveillance clout reminds us that Caul’s selection was primarily based on his externality. If lip reading is not sufficient for truth, the woman’s scream which becomes part of a psychologically-driven soundtrack underscore that only lies tell themselves freely. The Metzian voyeuristic slow zoom on Caul when he is under the sink constructs a fetishistic mirror effect for secondary identification but the contradictory dialogue of either true and false memory or possible present reality confound that identification into representing something completely different - a desire for the spectator to be provided with, and to have, knowledge regardless if Caul finds anything out himself. By the end of the film, the limits of the frame and the obscurity of Caul within it has allowed the spectator to become comfortably dislodged from secondary identification yet also remaining independent of an ultimately unsatisfying consumption by primary identification (which always maintains its lack of privilege for the spectator even if only in the limits of the frame). The spectator is now free and regardless of having attained knowledge or not, identification through the principle of poor reception (or poor reception effect) has provided the autonomy necessary to negate any anxiety from a jaunt into a Possible World. A Possible World being a possible existential extension of the self formed through a process of transposing the realms of subject-position to object-effect - and is hopefully well understood as a potential cause of anxiety as well as being a possible descriptor of the cinematic experience overall.

The poor reception effect is created through relocation of the auteur’s voice from primary to secondary identification and is thus able to engage a spectator in the process of identification but relieve the anxiety of the effects of that process through separating the identification process into conscious and perceptually distinct realms. The spectator maintains autonomy and provided the chance to gain knowledge will remain engaged with the film text. New Hollywood exploited this poor reception effect and mode of identification and thus formed a new film culture that would prove successful with audiences and profitable for the producers.

1. Jonathan Rosenbaum, “New Hollywood and the Sixties Melting Pot,” in The Last Great American Picture Show*,* eds., Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), pg.132. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. ibid, pp.145-146. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ibid, pg.133. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ibid, pg.138. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ibid, pg.146. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. ibid, pg.149. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. ibid, pg.140. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. ibid, pg.140. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Christian Metz, “The Imaginary Signifier - Psychoanalysis and the Cinema,” trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp.40-41. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Jonathan Rosenbaum, “New Hollywood and the Sixties Melting Pot,” in The Last Great American Picture Show*,* eds., Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), pp.134-135. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. ibid, pg.138. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. ibid, pp.141-142. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. ibid, pp.143-144. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. ibid, pg.150. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. ibid, pp.150-152. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. ibid, pg.148. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)