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Reel Revolutionaries: An Examination of Hollywood's Cycle of 1960s Youth Rebellion Films

by Aniko Bodroghkozy

This article analyzes how the major Hollywood studios attempted to lure youth audiences in 1969–1971 with a spate of films about campus activism and youth protest. The article also explores the responses to these representations by critics writing for the youth movement's underground newspapers.

The Hollywood film industry, in haphazard ways, began trying to win baby-boom viewers to its products with a spate of hippie-oriented films in the mid-1960s. By the end of the decade, the wooing of youth viewers had turned into a full-scale campaign to capture this lucrative but politically and culturally unstable sector of the population. By the late 1960s, Hollywood found itself trying to sell films that represented campus turmoil, the radicalization of young people, and the violence associated with student rebellion. Starting in 1969, a new cycle of film seemed to have been born—one focused on the young revolutionary. Studios such as MGM, which invested heavily in these films, hoped that these productions would finally bring the young people to the box office in large enough numbers to reverse the industry's economic downward spiral.

This article examines the industry's strategies in attempting to capture the youth market. It also examines the huge amount of attention bestowed on this cycle of "revolutionary" films by the underground press. This discursive site provides critical clues about how young people who aligned themselves in one way or another with campus-based New Left activism or more diffuse countercultural dropout lifestyles interpreted these movies. The films evoked both enthusiastic support as well as cries of cooptation from writers in the underground press. The films also led to bitter conflict over the relationship between revolutionary youth politics and mainstream American culture. They assisted proponents of the former in thinking through and making sense of their connection to the latter. To what extent could or should youth rebellion be made accessible and popular to those outside the already radicalized community? Who was popularizing these movies and for what purpose? Could New Left-style radical politics be disseminated through popular channels? Finally, youth movement responses to the genre of revolutionary youth films pointed to the fears, hopes, and stakes that could result from successful dissemination.

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Starting in the latter months of 1969 and continuing through 1970, the pages of *Variety* indicated that the entertainment industry was obsessed with attracting the youth audience. Beginning in 1966 and 1967, the major studios, following the lead of youth-oriented exploitation companies like American International Pictures, started seeing young moviegoers as their economic salvation. The regular family audience had retreated permanently, it seemed, to the suburbs and television. According to Motion Picture Association of America research, attendance was declining among every age group except those under thirty.¹ Much ballyhooed was the demographic statistic that by 1967 52 percent of the American population would be under the age of twenty-five.

Problematically for the industry, the pursuit of young viewers came as the studios lurched through a period of economic dislocation. Similar to what the film industry had suffered during the costly conversion to sound in the depths of the Depression, as well as during the rise of television in the early 1950s, the studios experienced huge losses in the late sixties and early seventies. United Artists lost \$85 million, MGM lost \$72 million, and Twentieth Century-Fox lost \$65 million. Columbia went into receivership.² Despite these dire financial numbers, the studios hitched their future fortunes to a cohort of the population characterized by extreme suspicion and distrust of all dominant social and cultural institutions.

In late 1968, MGM attempted to overcome that distrust by hiring a new, fairly young studio president, thirty-eight-year-old Louis F. Polk, a former food industry executive.³ Polk was supposed to inject “with-it” and “Now Generation” sentiments into the hoary old dream factory of Louis B. Mayer. His “youthful” credentials apparently resided in his ability to quote Marshall McLuhan and to describe film with McLuhanesque phrases, such as “the fluid medium.” For example, *Variety* quoted an address Polk gave to MGM stockholders in which he revealed the studio’s corporate strategy:

While I have a great respect for the printed word . . . no medium has the power to move its audience so immediately and so completely as film. The opportunity is to meet what the younger people of our society are demanding from the filmmaker by introducing stimulating and challenging as well as entertaining productions at a profit commensurate with the stockholders’ expectations.⁴

Would it be possible to align the demands and desires of rebellious youth with those of such staunch establishmentarians as stockholders? Whether this was or was not possible, the studio began to ballyhoo its upcoming “youthpix,” such as *Zabriskie Point* (1970), directed by famed Italian art-cinema luminary Michelangelo Antonioni, and *The Strawberry Statement* (1970), based on the firsthand account by nineteen-year-old student James S. Kunen of the much-publicized student uprising at Columbia University.

Other studios were quick to jump on the rebellious youth bandwagon, including Joseph E. Levine’s AvcoEmbassy. Levine had scored box-office gold with *The Graduate* (1967) and in 1969 used the success of that picture with the sixteen-to-thirty-year-old market to tout a new AvcoEmbassy program of pictures described as “nonconformist cinema.”⁵ Universal, Paramount, and Columbia also tried to

find projects with appeal to nonconformists. Specifically, all three studios were interested in films dealing with student rebellion and campus upheavals. Universal obtained an independently produced film titled *The Activist* (1970); Paramount came forward with *Medium Cool* (1969), which contained footage of the riots at the 1968 Democratic Party Convention in Chicago; and Columbia heralded both its Elliott Gould vehicle, *Getting Straight* (1970), which was set on a strike- and riot-prone college campus, and *RPM* (obviously standing for “revolutions per minute,” 1970), directed by the staunchly liberal Stanley Kramer, about a staunchly liberal college president trying to come to grips with his riot-torn campus.

While the studios seemed single-minded in their desire to appeal to the under-thirty audience, some in the industry had doubts about the policy. Paramount’s head of overseas sales, Bert Obrentz, feared that the antiestablishment themes of the youth-oriented films would prove difficult to market overseas.⁶

Marketing was also a concern of the members of the National Association of Theater Owners. Its annual meeting became a site for the playing out of generational struggles as younger and older exhibitors clashed over issues such as the upcoming Moratorium, the Vietnam War, and standards and tastes. Exhibitors debated the wisdom of directing so much attention and product at youth rather than at a broader audience. Yet they could come up with no ideas for ways to lure older viewers back to the theaters. A number of members of the organization appeared resentful about having to appeal to protesting, sexually promiscuous, self-righteous youngsters. One exhibitor at the convention observed, “If that blankety-blank war in Vietnam could be ended the whole exaggerated emphasis on youth could be restored to some balance and perspective.” Another attendee, according to *Variety*, “spoke of ‘youth tyrants’ imposing their standards and tastes on everybody else. The word ‘arrogance’ was also sounded by a few middle-aged theater operators.”⁷

If popular culture can function as the site on which historical transformations are worked, as Stuart Hall has theorized, then what we see here is suggestive of such a moment. The moral panic around youth “tyranny” and “arrogance” was symptomatic of ideological struggle. The discourses of rebellious youth seemed to be forcing themselves onto a sector of the culture industry.

Clearly youthpix did not speak with some “authentic” voice of the dissenting young—as if a univocal discourse was even possible from a movement so fraught with different positions and practices. The question was whether these films and their contentious circulation suggested, in mediated and compromised form, a process by which those discourses were being forced onto mainstream theater screens. In experimenting with this cycle of youth films, filmmakers needed to suggest something of the positions of activist, protesting youth. The resentments and anxieties circulating among film industry executives and practitioners suggest that they were often uncomfortable with the antiestablishment points of view, politics, and values that appeared to be expressed in their products.

Two, Three, Many Screen Revolutions. Anxiety and discomfort were clearly evident in early 1970 when Hollywood released a series of productions that all

explored some aspect of the upheavals on college campuses. *The Activist*, *Getting Straight*, *The Strawberry Statement*, *RPM*, and *Zabriskie Point* were all released within a few months of each other. Aware of the fickleness of the youth market they were chasing, producers and studio executives feared that the universities would settle down before the cycle of protest films worked their way through the exhibition circuits. As *Variety* noted on January 14, 1970: "Documentation of the last decade's social convulsion at Columbia and Berkeley may be ancient history by spring vacation."⁸

As it turned out, the cycle of campus revolt films did not circulate during a period of quiescence. Spring 1970 was marked by the most widespread campus uprisings in history as student protest erupted over the May 4 massacre of four students by Ohio National Guard troops at Kent State University and President Richard Nixon's April 30 invasion of Cambodia. A full-scale national student strike crippled and shut down universities throughout the nation, brought hundreds of thousands of students into the streets, and, in retrospect, prompted Henry Kissinger to observe that "the very fabric of government was falling apart. The Executive Branch was shell-shocked."⁹

This apocalyptic conjuncture of events may have made youth revolution films relevant and timely, but Hollywood was unprepared and unable to deal with the political reverberations and repercussions of the massive outpouring of rage. *Variety* began ringing the alarm bells on May 6, 1970, in a front-page story about a one-month mass boycott to protest the Cambodia incursion. Motion picture theaters throughout the nation were to be targeted in an attempt to put "financial pressure on exhibs and distributors alike, many of whom are leaders in their local communities." The article pointed out that major-studio executives were thought to have ties to those in government and the military. Organizers of the planned boycott were astute in targeting the film industry since so many of the studios were pegging their financial hopes on the youth audience. The *Variety* piece noted, "With so many films currently exploiting the youth market, such action, if carried out on a large scale, would indeed put a financial dent in film revenues."¹⁰ In the wake of the Cambodia/Kent State upheavals, theater owners expressed grave fears about what the climate of violence and disruption would do to their box-office receipts.¹¹

Possibly aware of the threatening subject matter of the youth-oriented films, producers and filmmakers quickly tried to deemphasize the politically oppositional potential of some of these productions by focusing attention on individual, character-driven elements of the movies. According to Irwin Winkler, co-producer of *The Strawberry Statement*, "We're not about a college revolution. . . . [The film] is about growing up. About a college student who goes through an identity crisis during a college revolt." *Getting Straight* director Richard Rush made a similar comment about his project, which he argued "is about a graduate student who goes through an identity crisis during a student revolt."¹²

At the level of production, there was marked uneasiness and ambivalence about engaging with divisive political issues. Producers tried to force their films into familiar and by implication "safe" narrative formats and categories. They insisted

that their pictures were not about social dissent but about crises of individual identity and male coming of age. In these “preferred” readings, student rebellion served as a colorful backdrop to more traditional and (ideologically) more easily contained stories of personal growth and change.

The advertising campaigns for some of these films also attempted to reinforce ideologically safer readings. The ad for *The Strawberry Statement* contained a graphic of the film’s long-haired protagonist on his knees, cradling and protecting a screaming young woman in the midst of what appeared to be a riot. Above the chaotic image, the copy read: “Their dream was to go to college.”¹³ The signifiers of “campus riot” were forced to the sides and back of the image while the obviously shattered dreams of the two attractively anguished young protagonists were positioned front and center. Like traditional Hollywood narratives, the iconography of the ad, with the male protecting the emotionally and physically more vulnerable female, also suggested the constitution of the heterosexual couple along patriarchal lines (fig. 1).

The ad for *Zabriskie Point* evacuated any reference to campus mayhem and political violence. The ad’s graphic featured a naked young couple making love in the desert, suggesting the narrative was concerned more with youthful sexual abandon than with youthful political agitation.

These attempts to minimize or erase the political significance of youth dissent as a social crisis ran up against the films’ textual mechanisms, which attempted to render revolt and politicization as realistically as possible. Universal’s promotion of *The Activist* went to great lengths to emphasize that the film was produced with the cooperation of the Berkeley activist community. The picture starred nonactor Mike Smith, one of the organizers of the Bay Area Stop the Draft Week demonstrations, and his real-life girlfriend, Leslie, and the two engaged in what was touted as a real-life love scene.¹⁴ *Zabriskie Point* also starred two young (and very photogenic, if wooden) nonactors and featured Black Power luminary Kathleen Cleaver of the Black Panther Party. She was featured in the film’s opening scene, a meeting of radical students at which black militants, including Cleaver, challenged the white students’ revolutionary commitment. *The Strawberry Statement* featured a cameo appearance by the “real” James S. Kunen, author and subject of the book on which the movie was based, playing a sit-in leader trying to conduct a meeting in a student-occupied administration building. Finally, *Medium Cool* featured “real” footage of the Chicago Democratic Convention riots, shot by director Haskell Wexler and crew, who happened to find themselves in the midst of the mayhem while filming their fictional feature. In a scene in which protesters were being tear gassed, Wexler pointedly left in nondiegetic audio of one of his crew shouting to the director, “Watch out, Haskell, it’s real!”¹⁵

Textual markers of “the real” were not limited to the use of nonactors connected to the youth movement or to the use of documentary footage of protest events. If one could not find a real riot to film, as Wexler had, one could recreate one. Each of the films contained scenes of campus uprisings structured according to codes and conventions of cinéma vérité. Hand-held cameras, zoom shots, pulled focus, ragged, jarring, and disorienting editing patterns with very quick

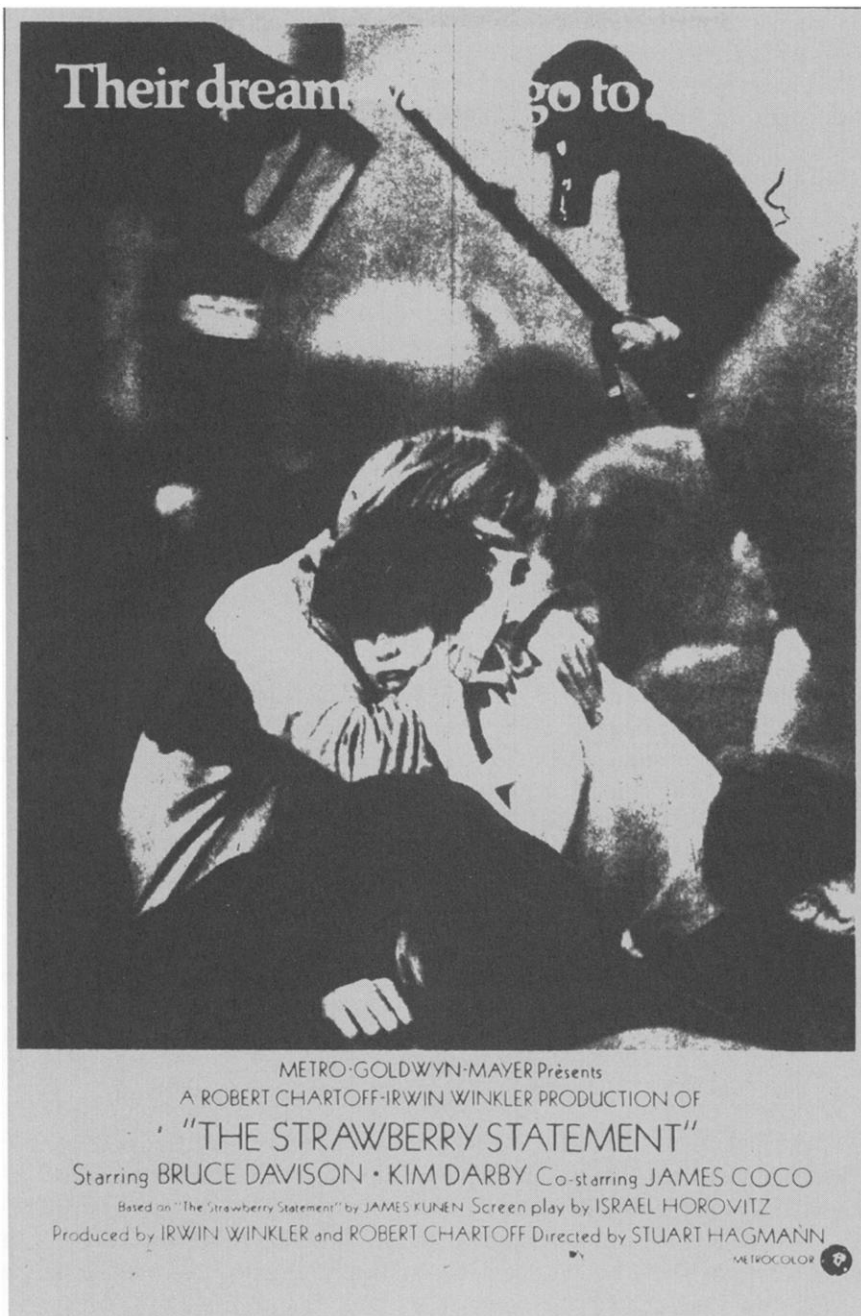


Figure 1. The constitution of the heterosexual couple is along patriarchal lines during a campus riot in *The Strawberry Statement* (1970). This ad ran in numerous underground newspapers. Courtesy *Ramparts* magazine.

cuts, chaotic, sloppily framed compositions, and jumbled, incoherent soundtracks were all used as representational strategies in these films.

Underground Readings. Some of the critics writing for the youth movement's underground press were deeply troubled by these realist strategies.¹⁶ The *Los Angeles Free Press* ran two reviews of *The Activist* side by side. Both blasted the film, in part for its dishonest use of cinéma vérité techniques. Reviewer Jack Weinberg argued that while producer-directors Art and Jo Napoleon used members of the Berkeley community "as evidence of the film's authenticity," the movie was "phony from beginning to end."¹⁷ Both Weinberg and reviewer Richard Whitehall disparaged the dishonest use of Mike Smith and other "real" activists, whom the reviewers said were presented in such unflattering ways that their political commitments and motivations became incomprehensible. According to Weinberg, "The unwillingness of the filmmakers to attribute to their characters even the most tentative and meager political consciousness renders those characters activist automatons."¹⁸ Whitehall suggests that because these were such lousy actors, it was impossible to explore their passions and convictions cinematically. A sense of betrayal underscored both reviews because the trust of a radical community had been so abused by, at best, the "hip liberalism" and paternalism of the Napoleons.

The vérité techniques of *Getting Straight* and *The Strawberry Statement* also came under attack from undergroundlings. Chuck Kraemer, writing for the *Boston Phoenix*, found *Strawberry* director Stuart Hagman guilty of sins similar to those ascribed to the Napoleons. Kraemer argued that Hagman "has no clear attitude at all about revolution, violence, or youth in general, except that they are fun to photograph." The climactic riot scene, he argued, was politically meaningless: "What's the point? That cops are brutal? That protest only meets repression? Hardly. The point, once again, is that screaming kids, tough cops, clouds of tear gas and gratuitous violence are all fun to photograph."¹⁹

Kraemer criticized *Getting Straight* on essentially the same grounds:

No specific issues are ever even hinted at in "Getting Straight"—this is protest as an *end*, not a means to social reform. If this movie were a newspaper, its demonstration coverage would be all scare headlines; maybe one or two cursory lead paragraphs, but no trenchant editorials. Riots are so damn photogenic; it's so much easier to make movies about the highly visible symptoms than about the underlying causes.²⁰

The danger in reveling in vérité violence was not only that causes and contexts would be ignored but that the sheer power of some of the imagery would sweep away concern for the less photogenic underlying issues. The youth movement may have forced the entertainment industry to pay attention to its activities, but the victory may have been a hollow one. How politically effective could pretty pictures of tear-gassed students be?

As it turned out, there was a great deal of debate about this issue in underground newspapers. Climactic scenes of confrontation and riot received extensive attention from youth movement critics, commentators, and letter writers. If Hollywood was hell-bent on disseminating representations of radical student

rebellion, then the question for those participating in these revolts was, Could these films in any way be salvaged for movement use, or were they hopelessly cooptive and reactionary?

Zabriskie Point and *The Strawberry Statement* generated particularly heated debate, though neither was a success at the box office. The plot of *Zabriskie Point*, to the extent that it has one, concerns Mark, a college student, who is unsure of the depth of his revolutionary commitment. During a campus confrontation, he shoots a cop, escapes to an airfield where he steals a plane, and flies into the Arizona desert. There, he meets Daria, an apolitical, young, part-time secretary on her way to her boss's retreat, where he is hatching plans for a lucrative development deal. The two young people engage in existential discussions and then make love in the dunes in a dreamlike scene involving many other anonymous young lovers. The two then go their separate ways, Mark to be shot and killed while trying to return the stolen plane and Daria to her capitalist boss's compound. While there, she has what may or may not be a fantasy vision of a spectacular terrorist bombing of the compound. The entire building explodes in an apocalyptic act of destruction that Antonioni filmed from various angles. This is followed by other explosions as various objects are spectacularly destroyed.

One critic for the *East Village Other* dismissed *Zabriskie Point* as "perhaps the most definitive piece of youth cultural kaka." He linked this film and the recent wave of youth rebellion films to previous cycles of American International Pictures (AIP)-type youth fare:

The new "improved" youth market pictures are concerned with contemporary issues: dope, the draft, political involvement/alienation. Relevant issues nonetheless, but in a macabre enough manner, just as relevant as all those surfer movies ten years ago . . . still "something for the kids. . . ."

There are two types of power, real and illusionary. This generation has been rather successfully hyped on the latter. It's a seller's market and although we've become quite sophisticated in the media arts, we still have a long way to go between being used and using the power. Youth-oriented films, pop music, which we don't control now, Teen Films, the works are all manipulative [inventions?] to separate you from your [integrity?]. You purchase nothing except those same shitty goods which you accuse your parents, the other generation of hoarding.²¹

Other reviewers were less willing to dismiss the film. James Lichtenberg, also writing for New York's *East Village Other*, suggested that the film's ending "resonated with prophesy." The Weathermen, violent revolutionary offshoots of the recently defunct New Left group Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), had recently begun planning a campaign of terrorist bombings. In March 1970, while *Zabriskie Point* was in national distribution, four Weathermen accidentally blew themselves up along with the exclusive Greenwich Village townhouse they were using as a bomb factory. In light of this violent incident, Lichtenberg found the film "simultaneously yesterday's papers, present reality, [and] tomorrow's reality, an unattractive but increasingly possible alternative . . . and so on down the spectrum. How profoundly its truths will be realized depends on whether a nonviolent

revolution is possible any more.”²² The film provided a way to think through the implications of the new directions into which youth radicalism was lurching.

If Lichtenberg was concerned and troubled about this violent turn in youth politics and used his review to point out the seeming exhaustion of other possibilities for revolutionary change, Emanuel Goldman, writing for Boston's *Phoenix*, used the same material to reach a more hopeful conclusion. He noted that only “objects, things, symbols of American mentality” were destroyed during the film's conclusion. Arguing for a theme of rebirth amid necessary destruction, he quoted from the film's dialogue:

As Daria muses in the desert, “Wouldn't it be nice if we could plant new thoughts in our brains, like a good childhood and groovy parents.” And that's what the young are doing: planting new thoughts, raising new children, “together” children. Yes, there is violence going on, and man, that's part of the scene, too. If you push someone against a wall, he's [sic] going to fight.”²³

One could argue that the film and these readings perpetuated the aesthetization of violence and “revolutionism” outside any context of the possible. Examining *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *If...* (1968), Todd Gitlin has argued that these cultural products decontextualize “revolution”: “In the bloody spring of 1968, it was easy to lose a sense of the real. Increasingly the cultural artifacts, like the movement itself, were taking for granted a context of political extremity.”²⁴ *Zabriskie Point* as a cultural text validated both Goldman's and Lichtenberg's visions of an imminently achievable and probably violent revolution instigated by the young. Whether the political and social conditions actually existed for such a radical reordering of power relations is a difficult question for a historian to grapple with even with the luxury of hindsight. However, in the late sixties and early seventies, various sectors of the American social, cultural, and political landscape became obsessed with this possibility. One of those areas was popular culture and texts like *Zabriskie Point*, which seemed to aid the process of imagining revolution.

The Strawberry Statement produced even more heat around this issue. Perhaps surprisingly, considering the film is all but forgotten today, it generated more copy in the pages of the underground press than almost any other Hollywood offering, including such sixties “youth classics” as *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider* (1969), and *The Graduate*.²⁵ Only *Woodstock* (1970) elicited more attention. *The Strawberry Statement* follows the exploits of Simon, an average college student who is more interested in crew practice and girls than in campus politics.²⁶ He participates in a sit-in more for libidinal reasons than out of any commitment to the issues of the protest, which the film leaves vague. He becomes enamored with and pursues a surprisingly chaste romance with another young protester, played by Kim Darby, ubiquitous in Hollywood at the time for her roles as sweet, charming, cute, and presexual young women. The film concludes with a twenty-minute-long scene of a police bust of the university gymnasium, where the students are holed up.

The film's production was fraught with difficulties and controversy. New York mayor John Lindsay as well as the trustees of Columbia University refused to allow filming anywhere in New York City, and the opening credits of the movie comment on the city's lack of hospitality. The film was eventually shot in San Francisco. The project was also the target of what appeared to be sabotage during postproduction. Rolls of film to be transported between the studio and the lab mysteriously disappeared or were spoiled. In addition, a poster of Che Guevara that adorned the production's editing room was ripped down by construction workers with the approval of some MGM employees.²⁷

As with so much of the commentary in the underground press about youth rebellion films, the writing on *The Strawberry Statement* focused the most attention on its ending. While the Boston *Phoenix* reviewer argued that the film evacuated political meanings by creating riot imagery that was fun to film, other reviewers said that the movie had the potential to radicalize viewers. A writer for Atlanta's *Great Speckled Bird*, in an effusive review, proclaimed the film "the most effective propaganda statement I've ever seen." The reviewer argued that, in its first hour or so of "bullshit liberal" representations of college life, the film managed to involve the largest number of viewers: "You look around the theater and you see about two hundred nicely dressed, expensively hip college and high school students. All of whom identify madly. With the sexist jokes. With the way the hero sympathizes with his radical fellow students, but takes part in their actions only for kicks." The reviewer argued that this liberalism was a mere ploy to break down the defenses of these nonradical students. The film had other purposes—political ones—that manifested themselves during the climactic riot scene:

Like the film's last fifteen minutes, the effect is incredible. All of a sudden those same people who an hour ago were laughing at the way the hero used those "just too radical" people for kicks (or sex in the case of the radical women he pursued) . . . all of a sudden those same people who had been identifying for an hour with a bullshit liberal hero . . . all of a sudden those expensively hip kids are sincerely screaming for pigs' blood. Are applauding when the bullshit hero knocks a pig on his ass. . . .

I came away from *The Strawberry Statement* mad . . . radically mad. So did a lot of people like me. We didn't just "agree" with somebody's analysis of our political situation: our heads were changed.²⁸

"Old-guard" New Leftists like Todd Gitlin were dismayed at the apparent anti-intellectualism represented by this kind of response, which they saw seizing hold of the movement as it lurched toward an embrace of violent revolutionism.²⁹ The *Bird* reviewer found the film effective because it did not rationally present a radical political analysis. Rather, the film elicited a visceral reaction. Scott Griffith, writing for *Distant Drummer*, echoed this reading. He also considered the film a "masterful piece of propaganda for the Movement. In the final scenes, you can feel your muscles tighten and you want to break your knuckles in some cop's face. It doesn't even try to be objective: it's the story of how one student becomes radicalized, and it's important for that reason alone."³⁰

As presented in these films, “radicalization” did not appear to be an intellectual process but a bodily transformation. The yelling and applauding of audiences and the tightening of muscles were the markers of politicization. Cerebral New Left politicians would have none of this. But their heavily intellectual methods were no longer the dominant form of movement building.

While one could argue that “shock” radicalizing was a somewhat shallow form of activism, this philosophy was pervasive within New Left, SDS-oriented activity by the latter half of the 1960s. The Columbia bust became emblematic of the apparent political power this form of radicalization could generate. Student rage at the brutal treatment meted out by the New York City police department to the students occupying university buildings led to a campus-wide strike that forced the entire institution to grind to a halt. This bastion of the power elite, this active participant in the Military-Industrial Complex, which financed and pursued war-related research, was rendered incapable of functioning. An act of unmasked hegemonic coercion resulted in radical anger potent enough to threaten the very workings of institutionalized power. The significance of the response to films like *The Strawberry Statement* was that, for some viewers, these pieces of symbolic culture appeared capable of evoking the same effect as participating in protests and witnessing police repression. Representations of repression of youth dissent and the “actual” dissent one might experience on one’s own campus collapsed on top of one another.

In a major piece in the *Los Angeles Free Press*, Sam Blazer argued: “*The Strawberry Statement* is trying to reach out to the inert—the dazed of the nation whom the radical movement has not yet been gifted or patient or systematic enough to nurture.” He went on to point out that the film “is an attempt to reclaim the young before their submission becomes a style, before their detachment takes hold, becomes habitual, ritualized, overwhelming—like the blankness of their elders.”³¹

In an interview Blazer conducted with Stuart Hagman, the director of *The Strawberry Statement*, and screenwriter Israel Horovitz, both thirty, the question of the film’s relationship to the radical student movement came up over and over. At one point, Horovitz, who was actively involved in movement politics, argued that the film was not trying to reach out to or explain the radical left. It was trying to reach nonradicalized teenagers and their parents “through the magic of MGM,” through which they could gain access to perhaps forty million viewers. “There is no need to further radicalize those already in the radical movement. They’re too busy to go to movies anyway. The film is an attempt to take kids who are still formative and give them a sense of community.” That comment led to the following interchange:

FP [Free Press]: Are you familiar with Susan Sontag’s remark, to the effect that it is impossible for anybody working within the established order to really understand—much less express—the revolution?

HAGMAN: She said that in direct reference to us making *Strawberry* in San Francisco while she was there to attend the film festival.

HOROVITZ: In all honesty, we’ve probably debased the movement handily. But I repeat that the object of the film is not to bolster the commitment of people who are already committed. It’s assumed that movement people with any integrity are already

where they should be. It is the protected—as Simon is at first—who must learn some of the modes of injustice.³²

Thus, the film served as an organizing tool, perhaps replacing the base-building work that New Left groups increasingly neglected as they found themselves caught up in the urgency of preparing for the imminent revolution.

These heady estimations of the radical political possibilities of the film did not go unchallenged in the pages of the underground press. One reader, responding to Scott Griffith's review, said that calling the film masterful propaganda was "politically appalling." He argued that Griffith had become "completely befuddled by Hollywood's pragmatic use of a highly emotional ending" and went on to ask the *Drummer* editors to reprint a review by Columbia strike participant Dotson Rader that originally ran in *Time*. The editors appended a portion of that review, which included this observation by Rader: "I am afraid that what it [the film] actually is is a cheap attempt at commercial co-optation and exploitation of the anguish of a generation."³³ And so the overwrought attempts to figure out the meanings of these culture industry representations continued.

Woodshuck, Woodshlock, Wood\$tock. While the political intentions and radical possibilities of the campus revolt films remained a contentious and unresolved issue among the undergroundlings, the response to *Woodstock* was unambiguous. The critics supported the film, on the one hand, and raged at Warner Bros., the studio distributing it, on the other.

The film was an independently produced three-hour documentary about the extraordinary "peace and music" fair that attracted almost half a million young people to hear their generation's top rock troubadours on a patch of farmland in upstate New York. Besieged by rain and a festival organization unprepared for the hordes of long hairs who showed up to crash the event, *Woodstock* was touted as the counterculture's apotheosis: a three-day enactment of the peaceful and loving possibilities inherent in sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Producer Bob Maurice and director Michael Wadleigh used state-of-the-art cinematic technology and split-screen effects to portray not only the performers on stage but the often far more interesting members of the audience.

While the studios releasing the campus revolution films were clearly uneasy about their offerings, such was not the case as Warner Bros. got ready to launch *Woodstock*. A month before the film's Easter 1970 release, the studio was gearing up for the spectacular box-office demands it was sure the picture would elicit. Plans were made for continuous twenty-four-hour-a-day screenings if necessary. A massive advertising campaign was organized that included saturation use of radio spots, large ads, and inserts in newspapers (both mainstream and underground) as well as ads in magazines that the studio had not targeted much in recent years. While the festival's famous logo featured a dove perched on a guitar, Warner Bros. chose to project a different set of meanings. Mirroring the *Zabriskie Point* campaign, the widely circulated *Woodstock* ad featured an image of a naked young

couple frolicking in a pond (fig. 2). The mildly titillating image reinforced dominant notions of youth culture's earthy sexuality at the expense of other issues that might not have been as saleable.

To a large extent, the film as a film was exempt from criticism—longhaired filmmakers Wadleigh and Maurice seemed to be more or less aligned with the movement against the studio. The *Los Angeles Free Press* pointed out the struggles going on between the film's makers and the studio over the editing down of the 120 hours of material and the "plastic-fantastic features in some of the advertising."³⁴ Apparently, Warner Bros. hired Pinkerton guards to protect its valuable asset. It may have been somewhat problematic to criticize the film itself since, as a documentary, it carried all kinds of markers of "the real" for an event that was quickly achieving mythic significance within many segments of the youth community. If the filmmakers could be constructed as "us" against the rapacious "them" of the studio, then the film itself could be seen as the rightful property of "us." Hagman and Horovitz of *The Strawberry Statement* had tried to construct a similar antagonistic relationship to their studio in the pages of the underground press.³⁵

As another *Free Press* writer put it, the vibrancy of the film meant "you can almost forget that Altamont lay only a few weeks in the future. To watch the film through innocent eyes is to be part of the dream again, to forget the past, and to see a glimpse of the future we will someday build."³⁶ Reading strategies like this suggested that this particular representation of youth culture was somehow less mediated, less constructed, and less fictional than other Hollywood offerings. The film therefore generated little of the contentiousness over the representation of youth culture generated over the campus revolution films. *Woodstock*, as a representation of something factual, was somehow better able to portray convincingly, in all its shiny promise, what the counterculture had to offer. The film itself was "innocent" of capitalist strategies of commodification and containment. As a document, it functioned to reassert countercultural youth's visions of a different social order.

But although the film was generally above reproach as a document, criticism and protest over its dissemination became intense. The text had to be willfully disconnected from its context of dissemination. The selling of *Woodstock* functioned as a politically significant moment when the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation unmasked themselves in all their ugliness. The brazenness of Warner Bros.' capitalization on the Woodstock phenomenon provided movement writers with a blatant example of cooptation for easy deconstruction and attack. But it was also galling for radical youths to understand and point out the workings of that system on the one hand while realizing just how powerful that system was on the other. The agony was in finding one's political stance of negation and opposition hopelessly enmeshed within a system one wished to dismantle.

Warners, perhaps in an attempt to negotiate these characterizations of its objectives, dispatched Fred Weintraub, vice president in charge of creative services, who had bought *Woodstock* for the studio, to talk to the underground press. In an interview with the Liberation News Service after the film's premiere, Weintraub was clearly self-conscious about his position. He wryly told the interviewer not to say anything about his having run the legendary Greenwich Village music club the

love



woodstock

"Historic piece of film . . . STUNNING!"

— Charles Champlin, L.A. Times

"WOODSTOCK ECSTASY CAUGHT ON FILM!"

— Vincent Canby, N.Y. Times

starring joan baez • joe cocker • country joe & the fish • crosby, stills, ngsh
nirlo guthrie • richie havens • jimi hendrix • santana • john sebastian • sha-na-na
shy & the family stone • ten years after • the who • and 400,000 other beautiful people

a film by michael wadleigh • produced by
bob maurice • a wadleigh-maurice, ltd production
technicolor® from warner bros

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SORRY, PASSES NOT ACCEPTED DURING THIS ENGAGEMENT.

Figure 2. Hippie sex was used to sell Warner Bros.' *Woodstock* (1970). This ad appeared in an underground newspaper, the *Los Angeles Free Press*. Courtesy *Los Angeles Free Press*.

Bitter End for years, bringing Peter, Paul, and Mary and other folk luminaries to public notice: "Just say that I'm a capitalist pig shmuck rip-off artist dirty old man and leave it at that. No, tell them I like to rip off the peoples' culture, that's how I get off." In a more serious vein, Weintraub attempted to align himself discursively with antiestablishment youth culture by arguing that to change things, the young needed to learn how to use the Establishment. "What they need is someone who can sit down with bankers. If the bankers think they can profit, they'll play *our* game."³⁷ By trying to negotiate another way of interpreting the power relations between the movement and capitalism, Weintraub was arguing that the best way to refigure the system was through "Das Hip Kapital." His comments echoed those of MGM's "youthful" president, who argued that the interests of stockholders could be aligned with the interests of dissenting young people.

Some of these dissenters ended up outside theaters playing *Woodstock*. They were not lined up to buy tickets, however. In both Los Angeles and Berkeley, the Yippies organized generally successful pickets and boycotts of the film. Protesters in front of the Los Angeles Warners Theater on Wilshire Boulevard tried to entice filmgoers to join their picket, chanting, "Woodstock is here on the street, not in that sterile theater on the screen."³⁸ Yippie organizer Marc Savin noted that *Woodstock* was "the first movie in the history of Hollywood where the actors can't afford to go see it."³⁹ The Wilshire protest managed to convince some potential patrons to join the picketers, thus swelling their numbers. Protesters tore down *Woodstock* advertising posters and started a small bonfire leading to police intervention, arrests for unlawful assembly, and the destruction of property.⁴⁰

The studio may have expected the film to be box-office dynamite, but apparently it did not factor into its plans the massive outrage, anger, and protest the film would generate. The movie was greeted by bomb threats at its premiere and Yippie-organized boycotts and pickets.⁴¹ Threatening letters and phone calls poured into Warner Bros.' offices. The rage was almost entirely over the ticket price of \$4 to \$5—the most ever charged for a Hollywood release. Given the situation, it was easy for movement types to construct Warner Bros. as the archetypal capitalist machine commodifying youth's anticapitalist discourse and practice.

Protests at the UC Theater near the University of California in Berkeley were particularly effective. *Variety* explained the protest as the acts of "hippies, yippies and others who think the film makers somehow stole their movement and are keeping [it] captive in a film can." The article noted that the protest was taking a major toll on box-office receipts. Earnings at the UC Theater were wallowing at half the expected level. The paper noted the great degree of unity among the Berkeley young, who were loath to cross a picket line.⁴²

The underground press found itself in the contradictory position of being unable to refuse to accept the much-needed revenue that came with carrying ads for the film in its pages but not wanting to support the studio's profit mongering at the youth movement's expense. The *Los Angeles Free Press's* April 17, 1970, issue carried a lavish eight-page pull-out *Woodstock* insert supplied by Warner Bros. However, in the same issue, the paper ran an ad (a reprint from *Variety*) that ballyhooed the extraordinary box-office take the film was raking in (fig. 3). The caption underneath the ad noted:

"Woodstock is beautiful"

1st week

| | |
|--|-----------------|
| New York Trans Lux East (516 seats) | \$65,654 |
| Boston Cheri I (769 seats) | \$40,117 |
| Coral Gables Coral (700 seats) | \$25,429 |
| Los Angeles Fox Wilshire (1410 seats) | \$40,400 |
| Washington, D.C. Cinema (826 seats) | \$44,252 |
| Dallas Preston Royal (1000 seats) | \$25,030 |
| Toronto Uptown I (900 seats) | \$30,658 |

(how beautiful can you get?)

A Film by Michael Wadleigh - from Warner Bros.

Full Page Ad —Variety April 8—\$Power! One of the highest priced tickets in movie history is being charged those interested in seeing the Warner Brothers film version of the Largest Free Show in history, Woodstock. Pickets have been protesting the high ticket price (\$4.00 in Los Angeles, \$5.00 in New York City). Producers state that the price is high due to the financial difficulties the producers are having with suits etc. As Lenny Bruce once said... "Yatta Yatta Yatta." Bring the price down, not the people.

Figure 3. The *Los Angeles Free Press* reprinted the *Variety* ad that ballyhooed *Woodstock's* extraordinary box-office grosses. Underneath the ad, the underground paper protested the high ticket prices. Courtesy *Los Angeles Free Press*.

\$ Power! One of the highest priced tickets in movie history is being charged those interested in seeing the Warner Bros. film version of the Largest Free Show in history, Woodstock. Pickets have been protesting the high ticket price (\$4.00 in Los Angeles, \$5.00 in New York City). Producers say that the price is high due to the financial difficulties the producers are having with suits, etc. As Lenny Bruce once said, "Yatta, Yatta, Yatta." Bring the price down, not the people.⁴³

Other underground papers tried to persuade their readers to refuse to see the film. Mark Knops, editor of the Madison, Wisconsin, *Kaleidoscope*, argued that his readers should avoid the film because "pigs stick together." He pointed out that it was playing at the Esquire, a mainstream, commercial house rather than at the Broome St. Theater, a community owned-and-operated alternative space. To make the situation even more insulting, the Esquire management refused to take out ads in *Kaleidoscope*, preferring to throw its advertising dollars to the generally right-wing student paper, the *Badger Herald*, "the open enemy of the youth community."⁴⁴

The theaters playing the film frequently served as the tangible evidence of how the process of youth culture exploitation was working. Just as student protesters tended to target university campuses and their war-related activities since the "Military-Industrial Complex" was just too distant and too abstract to serve as a site of protest, in instances of protest over cultural incorporation, the Hollywood studios were also rather abstract and distant. The local theater functioned as a more concrete target for protest.

A writer for the *Phoenix* railed against a local Boston theater showing *Woodstock* not just for overcharging for tickets, but for overcharging for watered-down Cokes, charging for the use of lavatories, harassing patrons who chose to smoke either tobacco or pot, and for peddling a *Woodstock* program at inflated prices:

Yeah, it sounds mundane, but the name of the game is co-optation, and more specifically, the rip-off of alternative culture by movie moguls with money-on-the-brain. I don't want to end on a sour note: go see the movie, by all means, but dig what it represents. It doesn't represent Woodstock Nation, and if you can't discern the oinks in the soundtrack, you're not listening very hard.⁴⁵

Conclusion: Oinks in the Soundtrack? In the end, young people remained undecided about whether youthpix had "oinks" or messages of revolution on their soundtracks. For the Hollywood studios, the question was easier to answer. By early 1971, the industry's infatuation with the nation's rebellious young had cooled considerably. A page-one banner headline story in *Variety* on February 24, 1971, argued that an economic slump and higher tuition costs were putting a damper on the discretionary income of college students. The story also noted a sudden rise in nostalgia pervading films and other arts.⁴⁶ Rebellious youth films did not disappear. *Billy Jack* (1971)—an independently produced film about a karate-kicking former Marine protecting a community of nonviolent hippies—would be enormously popular. However, campus disruption films went by the wayside, as did the studios' policy of targeting the young almost exclusively.

The campus revolution and youth rebellion films may have been only sporadically successful at the box office but they were significant culturally and politically.

The discursive struggles that swirled around these films at the level of production and dissemination, as well as at the level of reception, indicate that issues of popularization and mass distribution of the protests of the sixties functioned as important sites of cultural struggle. No matter how much youth activists may have wanted to ignore the ways the popular culture industries were representing their activities, it was impossible to refuse to engage in some form of dialogue. The images and portrayals were just so ubiquitous and so demanding of response. Some respondents attempted to negotiate with these mass-produced texts and argue for their usefulness to the movement; others saw their usefulness in exposing the nefarious workings of commodity capitalism.

For their part, the Hollywood studios found themselves in the untenable position of wanting to appeal to middle-class baby boomers but trying to do so during a period when the most vocal edge of that group was engaged with antiestablishment politics that put many of the young in the film industry's potential audience at odds with all mainstream institutions. The films that resulted and the publicity campaigns that promoted them reveal a schizophrenic response as Hollywood negotiated an ideological balancing act. While some of the "reel revolution" films, such as *The Strawberry Statement*, attempted to circulate at least vaguely progressive representations of campus demonstrators, the films were often saddled with visual strategies that emphasized cinematic pyrotechnics over political content.

The evidence provided by underground press coverage of these Hollywood offerings point to a cohort of youth who were highly sophisticated and critical media children. They could point out and deconstruct Hollywood's various attempts at ideological cooptation. But when Hollywood "got it right," as Warner Bros. did with *Woodstock*, one gets a sense of the enraged powerlessness many New Left and countercultural youth must have felt before the behemoth of American popular culture. Launching protest rallies over ticket prices seemed a woefully inadequate means to stem the containment and coopting of youth rebellion. That such protest occurred and that movement youth *did* talk back to the screen indicate that Hollywood's attempt to commodify and package youth rebellion did not occur without struggle by the intended audience for these offerings. That Hollywood had such difficulties in packaging films about political rebellion and disaffection also indicates that the "conquest of cool" could be highly problematical and destabilizing for the culture industry, even as it could also, occasionally, be highly profitable.⁴⁷

Notes

1. "Film a Goddess to Young Collegians but Babysitters Discourage Marrieds," *Variety*, November 1, 1967, 12. A few months later, the MPAA released another survey indicating that 48 percent of box-office admissions went to those in the sixteen-to-twenty-four age range. See "Pix Must 'Broaden Market': 18% of Public; 76% of Audience," *Variety*, March 20, 1968, 1. (This was a page-one lead story.)
2. These observations were made by A. H. Howe, a Bank of America executive in charge of production financing, quoted by Tino Balio, "Introduction to Part II," in Balio, ed., *Hollywood in the Age of Television* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 259.

3. Polk did not last very long. He was replaced about a year later by former CBS-TV president James Aubrey.
4. Stuart Byron, "Polk ('Now' Generation) Begins: McLuhan-Quoter, Gal-Charmer, MGM's Gabby Annual Meet," *Variety*, January 15, 1969, 3.
5. Hank Werba, "Joe Levine's 'New Faces of '70s': AVEMB Keys in Young Directors," *Variety*, October 8, 1969, 7.
6. Abel Green, "Over-25 Audience Dormant, Not Dead, and Needed, Says Par's Bert Obrentz," *Variety*, December 24, 1969, 1, 54.
7. Robert J. Landry, "To Be 'Youthful' Not Enuf: Film Biz: Gotta Bring Back 'Old,'" *Variety*, November 19, 1969, 5, 24.
8. Rick Setlowe, "Campus 'Revolution' Themes Coming: First-to-Market Angle at Columbia," *Variety*, January 14, 1970, 6.
9. Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 410. The Kissinger quote comes from Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit, 1983), 194–95.
10. "U.S. Youth Talk: Shun Films, Scare the Establishment," *Variety*, May 6, 1970, 1, 92.
11. Robert J. Landry, "Theatres' Fear of Violence: 'Revolution' on Worry Agenda," *Variety*, May 13, 1970, 5.
12. Setlowe, "Campus 'Revolution' Themes Coming," 6.
13. *Los Angeles Free Press*, July 17, 1970, 16. This ad ran in numerous youth movement-oriented publications, including the New Left magazine *Ramparts*.
14. Jack Weinberg, "'The Activist' Pseudo-Movie-Movement," *Los Angeles Free Press*, December 5, 1969, 55, 59.
15. *Medium Cool* is not, strictly speaking, a campus revolt film since, unlike the other features, there are no scenes on a college campus. Nevertheless, the film shares many textual and reception similarities with the other films discussed.
16. The underground press was an alternative media institution for the disparate conglomerations of politically and socially disaffected middle-class youth in the United States roughly between the years 1965 and 1971. Run on shoe-string budgets with nonprofessional young writers, underground papers appeared in most major cities and college towns. By 1969, more than five hundred of these papers had sprung up around the country distributing anywhere from 2 to 4.5 million copies to "radicals, hippies, racial minorities, soldiers, and curiosity seekers," according to Abe Peck in his history of the underground press, *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 183. The *Los Angeles Free Press*, one of the first and most widely circulated of these papers, reached a readership of almost 100,000. The counterculture-oriented *East Village Other* and *Chicago Seed* reached sixty-five thousand and twenty-three thousand respectively.
17. Weinberg, "'The Activist' Pseudo-Movie-Movement," 55.
18. *Ibid.*, 59.
19. Chuck Kraemer, "'Strawberry Statement' on the Silver Screen," *Phoenix*, September 5, 1970, 30–31.
20. Chuck Kraemer, "About Getting Straight," *Phoenix*, June 20, 1970, 23.
21. David Walley, "Cultural Kaka, Zabriski [sic] Point and Other Non-Entities," *East Village Other*, February 25, 1970, 8. The text is difficult to decipher in places. Words in brackets are my guesses at what the wording is.
22. James Lichtenberg, "It's All Right Ma, America's Only Bleeding," *East Village Other*, April 14, 1970, 17.

23. Emanuel Goldman, "'Zabriskie Point': American Symbolism," *Phoenix*, March 5, 1970, 17.
24. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980), 200.
25. *The Graduate*, surprisingly, generated next to no commentary in the underground papers I surveyed.
26. See James Simon Kunen, *The Strawberry Statement: Notes of a College Revolutionary* (New York: Random House, 1968). After Kunen's Warholian fifteen minutes of fame, he went on to become a defense attorney. He wrote another book about defending criminals, then left the bar and joined the staff of *People* magazine. The Jeff Goldblum character in the quintessential 1980s "yuppie" film *The Big Chill* (1983) was inspired by Kunen. When I interviewed Kunen in 1987 at his *People* office, he emphasized that he never did personality profiles but concentrated on political stories.
27. Sam Blazer, "Amplifying the 'Strawberry Statement,'" *Los Angeles Free Press*, July 24, 1970, 33. According to the article, there were also speculations "that anonymous MGM functionaries had tried earlier this year to blow *Zabriskie Point* away" (33).
28. "The Strawberry Statement," *Great Speckled Bird*, July 27, 1970, 15.
29. See Gitlin, "Inflating Rhetoric and Militancy," *The Whole World Is Watching*, chap. 6, and "The Implosion," *The Sixties*, chap. 17.
30. Scott Griffith, "Film: Cinema Riots," *Distant Drummer*, July 10, 1970, 13.
31. Blazer, "Amplifying the 'Strawberry Statement,'" 33.
32. *Ibid.*
33. "Mail," *Distant Drummer*, July 30, 1970, 4. The letter was written by Bob Romanov.
34. Mary Reinholz, "Woodstock Was Free—Movie Should Be Too," *Los Angeles Free Press*, April 3, 1970, 6.
35. Blazer, "Amplifying the 'Strawberry Statement,'" 33.
36. Lloyd Steele, "Woodstock or Woodschtick?" *Los Angeles Free Press*, April 10, 1970, 56. Altamont was next—a big, free concert/festival organized by the Rolling Stones. Rather than peace and love, this event was marked by violence, bad vibes, and murder. Security was provided by the Hell's Angels, who ended by brutalizing and raping concert goers and beating one man to death with sticks right in front of the stage as the Stones performed.
37. Craig Karpel, "Das Hip Kapital," *Great Speckled Bird*, August 2, 1971, 7, emphasis added. The article was reprinted from the Liberation News Service, which provided underground papers around the country with news stories as UPI or AP did for the mainstream press.
38. Dennis Levitt, "Woodshuck Boycotted," *Los Angeles Free Press*, May 22, 1970, 6.
39. Dennis Levitt, "Woodstock," *Los Angeles Free Press*, May 8, 1970, 20.
40. Levitt, "Woodshuck Boycotted," 6.
41. The Yippies were a small but well-publicized group of activists who attempted to bring together New Left politicians and countercultural "heads." Under the leadership of media celebrities Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, the Yippies were particularly interested in using the dominant media as an organizing tool for youth revolution.
42. "Woodstock in-Flesh Had High Tabs and Nobody Thought of Boycotting It; But Film Version Feels Yippie Wrath," *Variety*, June 17, 1970, 5.
43. Ad for *Woodstock*, *Los Angeles Free Press*, April 17, 1970, 2.
44. Mark Knops, "Don't See *Woodstock* Because Pigs Stick Together," *Kaleidoscope*, May 19, 1970, 5.

45. Joe Pilati, "Woodschlock Mindblower," *Phoenix*, April 2, 1970, 17.
46. Joe Cohen, "'Teen Power' Fading at B.O.: Elder Backlash Cues Nostalgia," *Variety*, February 24, 1971, 1, 61.
47. "Conquest of cool" comes from the title of Thomas Frank's book about how the advertising industry in the 1960s successfully incorporated discourses associated with the hippie counterculture into mainstream advertising. See Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).