

Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class in 1970s American Cinema

By Derek Nystrom

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Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class in 1970s American Cinema By Derek Nystrom

Everywhere you look in 1970s American cinema, you find white working-class men. They bring a violent conclusion to *Easy Rider*, murdering the film's representatives of countercultural alienation and disaffection. They lurk in the Georgia woods of *Deliverance*, attacking outsiders in a manner that evokes the South's recent history of racial violence and upheaval. They haunt the singles nightclubs of *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, threatening the film's newly liberated heroine with patriarchal violence. They strut through the disco clubs of *Saturday Night Fever*, dancing to music whose roots in post-Stonewall homosexuality invite ambiguity that the men ignore.

Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men argues that the persistent appearance of working-class characters in these and other films of the 1970s reveals the powerful role class played in the key social and political developments of the decade, such as the decline of the New Left and counterculture, the re-emergence of the South as the Sunbelt, and the rise of the women's and gay liberation movements. Examining the "youth cult" film, the neo-Western "southern," and the "new nightlife" film, Nystrom shows how these cinematic renderings of white working-class masculinity actually tell us more about the crises facing the middle class during the 1970s than about working-class experience itself. *Hard Hats* thus demonstrates how these representations of the working class serve as fantasies about a class Other-fantasies that offer imaginary resolutions to middle-class anxieties provoked by the decade's upheavals.

Drawing on examples of iconic films from the era-*Saturday Night Fever*, *Cruising*, *Five Easy Pieces*, and *Walking Tall*, among others-Nystrom presents an incisive, evocative study of class and American cinema during one of the nation's most tumultuous decades.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Breaks new ground by raising questions about the portrayal of masculinity on the screen...Essential."
--*Choice*

"A thoroughly winning piece of literature: an invaluable companion piece to the films of postclassical Hollywood and their varied depictions of the working and professional-managerial classes. Brisk, frequently witty, and not too steeped in academese to ward off the nonprofessional cinephile, Nystrom's book demands a spot on your bookshelf somewhere between Biskind's *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* and that well-thumbed copy of Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness*." --*Cineaste*

"It has long been a source of amazement that, even as class warfare plays out so brazenly in U.S. domestic and international politics, media studies pays so little attention to class structure and to class-specific ideologies in corporate industrial culture. Derek Nystrom interrupts this repression by reading the representation of the working class in seventies' cinema as the imaginary resolution of crises within the professional-managerial class; in doing so, he has made an enormously lucid, nuanced-and courageous-contribution to film and indeed cultural studies generally."-David E. James, editor, *The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class*

"Discovering a surprisingly deep, conflicted fascination with working-class masculinity at the heart of emblematic movies of the 1970s like *Deliverance*, *Saturday Night Fever*, and *Cruising*, Derek Nystrom offers a fresh, persuasive account of how social class operates in American popular culture."-Carlo Rotella, author of *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature*

About the Author

Derek Nystrom was educated at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Virginia. He has published essays in *Cinema Journal* and *Postmodern Culture*, and co-authored, with Kent Puckett, *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies: A Conversation with Richard Rorty*. He teaches film and cultural studies in the English Department of McGill University.

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Gavin Wilkins:

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