

SPOTLIGHT ON: 'Midnight Cowboy'

It set the stage for allowing film to show society as it really is

By JACK MATHEWS
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In his colossally wrongheaded book, "Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values," critic Michael Medved singles out John Schlesinger's 1969 "Midnight Cowboy" as an exemplar of the collapse of morality in the motion-picture industry and says it helped to drive away moviegoers and keeps them away to this day.

Medved notes that just four years before the X-rated "Midnight Cowboy" won the Academy Award for best picture, that honor had gone to the G-rated "The Sound of Music." He asks: "Is it entirely coincidence that in the year of 'Midnight Cowboy' ... Hollywood films drew scarcely one-third the number of paying customers who had flocked to the theaters in the year of 'The Sound of Music'?"

No, it was not a coincidence, Medved answers himself. "Between 1965 and 1969," he says, "the values of the entertainment industry changed, and audiences fled from the theaters in horror and disgust."

Actually, something quite different was happening in America and Hollywood in the late '60s, though people were certainly fleeing in all directions in horror and disgust. For one thing, Hollywood wasn't changing its values; it was, out of pure economic necessity, starting to make movies that reflected the changes in society.

The late '60s marked the coming of age of the first wave of baby boomers, the most rebellious generation in modern history, and the movie industry, which had been steadily losing its family audience and older viewers to television, was learning that movies targeted specifically to the interests of those young adults could generate profits.

The truth is that America was going to change, whether Hollywood got on board or not, and for the first time in its history, the U.S. film industry attempted to stay in step with society instead of trailing years behind.

If you machete your way through the tangled logic of Medved, you find that his real complaint is against the ratings system, which supplanted the old production code of 1968 and gave mainstream filmmakers the license to dramatize the real world — with all the sex, violence and profanity inhabiting it — in ways American movies never had before.

Hard to believe, now that Motion Picture Association of America President Jack Valenti is a calcified pillar of the establishment, but he created the ratings system as a preemptive strike against community



Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman were both nominated for best actor Oscars for their work in "Midnight Cowboy."

censorship — and succeeded. Without those innocent-sounding initials — G, PG, R and X — movies would have been gagged, fig-leaved and disarmed.

"Midnight Cowboy," which has been re-released on the occasion of its 25th anniversary, is a milestone in the '60s revolution, though by no means its most important movie. It was the first major studio picture to be released with an X rating (the same version was rated R two years later), and the only one with an X to win the Oscar for best picture.

But it was preceded by the far more seminal films "Bonnie and Clyde" and "The Graduate," which spoke directly to the simmering alienation of American youth, and was overshadowed as a cultural event by the success of Dennis Hopper's "Easy Rider," which was in theaters at the same time.

Both "Midnight Cowboy" and "Easy Rider," with their sardonic Western titles, drew the spotlight away from the traditional Hollywood fantasies and focused it on the counterculture.

"Easy Rider" followed a pair of long-haired dropouts on a cross-country drug run from Los Angeles to New Orleans, while "Midnight Cowboy" told the more intimate tale of two homeless men helping each other get by in a hostile New York City.

It isn't hard to understand why so many people felt threatened by "Easy Rider." The movie, which looked as if the film stock had been marinated in LSD, seemed to glorify drug use, free sex, communal living and every other social convulsion of the time. "Midnight Cowboy," however, did none of that, and today seems almost a model of political correctness.

The story, adapted by Waldo Salt from James Leo Herlihy's novel, tells the story of Joe Buck (Jon Voight), a deluded Texas dishwasher who arrives in New York in a Roy Rogers outfit planning to sell his body to sex-starved society matrons. Instead he ends up sharing an abandoned tenement room with a crippled, tubercular street hustler

named Rizzo (Dustin Hoffman). It is a strange and moving tale of human bonding.

Salt, whose left-wing politics landed him on the Hollywood blacklist in the '50s, had a genuine empathy for social underdogs, and Schlesinger, an Englishman, felt no nationalistic urge to gloss over the flaws in the American psyche. "Midnight Cowboy" is a tough, cynical look at a country that was neither as wholesome nor as righteous as it would have the world believe.

Joe Buck, representing what one critic described as society's "last unenlightened fool," is chasing his own version of the American Dream, trying to better himself by selling his greatest talent — his sexual prowess — on the open market. Places like New York and Hollywood gobble up rubes like Joe by the gross, always have, but "Midnight Cowboy" may have marked the first time a film followed one down the hole.

What may surprise you most about "Midnight Cowboy," whether you're seeing it for the first time or the first time in 25 years, is how tame its content is. There are only glimpses of nudity, profanity is minimal and the most violent scene, Joe Buck beating a homosexual pickup, is implied.

"Midnight Cowboy" has too many imperfections to rank as a great film. Schlesinger's numerous quick-cut flashbacks, showing us Joe's confused childhood and sexual past and Rizzo's sunny fantasies, are simultaneously clumsy and corny. There was a pretension to a counterculture film style that dates sections of "Midnight Cowboy" as surely as bell-bottom trousers and psychedelic posters.

Still, the movie's gritty realism, subject matter and popularity helped usher in a decade of refreshing candor in Hollywood. It did not, as Medved seems to believe, mark the end of civilization as we knew it; it merely paved the way for films looking at civilization as it is. That achievement should be honored, not rued.