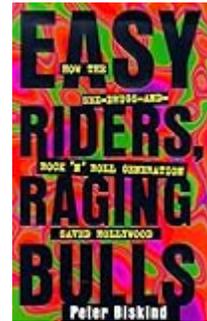




Peter Biskind. *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock'n'Roll Generation Saved Hollywood.* New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1998. 506 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-80996-0.



Reviewed by Chris Foran (Bowling Green State University)

Published on H-PCAACA (December, 1998)

By the late 1960s, Hollywood appeared to be at the end of its reel. The major studios, still mired in the big-budget mentality that was a reaction to the threat of television a decade earlier, were gambling more and more money on bigger and bigger productions—many of which, failing to connect with a changing movie audience, flopped miserably. At the same time, attendance in general was sliding; by 1967, average weekly movie attendance had dwindled to below half of early-1960s levels.

Into that creative and commercial malaise leapt a new breed of filmmaker. The startling success of *Easy Rider* (1969), following 1967's surprise hits *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, showed Hollywood's old guard that although they had lost touch with their audience, there were some filmmakers who hadn't. Young, brash, and talented, with imaginations stoked by film school training, a liberated lifestyle, and, above all, a passion for moviemaking, the New Hollywood was welcomed in by the old Hollywood, whose leaders, though bewildered by the new breed's unconventional ways, were smart enough to let the kids take a shot at saving their industry. And, as film writer Peter Biskind painstakingly notes in *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, they did save it, and even, for a time, ran the place.

But not for long. Biskind also shows that the new

generation, which ushered in one of the most creative periods in the history of filmmaking, was unable to hold onto what it had conquered. Instead of consolidating their grip on Hollywood, many of the new-breed filmmakers—including Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, William Friedkin, Paul Schrader, and Hal Ashby—frittered away their talents and power on binges of drugs, sex and egotistical extravagances, reducing many by the early 1980s to filmmakers-for-hire. Starting with the last days of the old studio system and continuing into the last days of the 1970s, Biskind chronicles the New Hollywood's emergence, rise, and ultimate collapse. Given the keys to the old generation's kingdom, Biskind shows, the next generation, in a line from *Easy Rider* that is often repeated in the book, “blew it.”

Biskind, whose terrific book on the themes of '50s film (*Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*) focuses on the movies' content to make its arguments, goes right to the source with *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*. Or rather, he goes to the sources: Biskind, former executive editor of *Premiere* and former editor in chief of *American Film*, interviewed scores of filmmakers and denizens of the world of movies from the 1960s and 1970s, from Robert Altman to Frank Yablans. Over a five-year period, Biskind talked extensively with nearly every major actor, director, producer,

studio executive and other creative talent who played a key role in Hollywood during the period from *Bonnie and Clyde* to *Raging Bull* (1980), and their remarks are almost alarmingly candid—not just about their contemporaries, but about themselves. The result is an invaluable collection of first-person perspectives on one of the most vital periods in the history of American culture. Despite the bounty of oral history, the book doesn't degenerate into a "he said, then she said, then they filmed" history. Biskind does a masterful job of melding together the period's participants' stories (which frequently contradict) into an engaging chronicle.

Interwoven into these personal tales are Biskind's own analyses of some of the period's more important works—important both as film artifacts and within the context of the New Hollywood era. For example, his perspective on *The Exorcist*, Friedkin's 1973 blockbuster, reflects both the film's appeal to early 1970s moviegoers and the director's own inner turmoil (p. 223). For a period of moviemaking that stressed the personal over the epic, Biskind's interview-driven framework provides fodder for and helps shape insights into movies as varied as *Mean Streets* (1973), *Star Wars* (1977) and *The Godfather* (1972).

The book's few weaknesses also result from Biskind's "you are there" approach. The mountain of anecdotal material, while effective in revealing the ethos of the time, features some wild contradictions, and, in some in-

stances, tales of incidents that are refuted by those purportedly involved in them (a hilarious scene in which Warren Beatty supposedly offered to kiss Jack Warner's feet loses its punch when Biskind acknowledges after relating it in detail that Beatty insists it never happened) (p. 23). Further, the wealth of first-person material also detracts from Biskind's frequently first-rate analysis, although the book is designed more as a chronicle of an age of moviemaking than an interpretation of the products of that age. But the reflective anecdotes do give his story a sort of noir-ish fatalism; every incident, in Biskind's presentation, is filled with foreshadowing, telegraphing the end of this brief, shining time.

But these are more minor annoyances than glaring problems. For the most part, Biskind does a brilliant job of juggling the personalities, productions and performances from the period, showing how the personal relationships play themselves out behind the camera and on the screen. *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* is a terrific read—but more importantly—it is a highly valuable source of insights into an era of moviemaking that some call Hollywood's last golden age. Thanks to Biskind's persistent and perceptive efforts, this chronicle lays out a solid foundation for future analysis.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pcaaca>

Citation: Chris Foran. Review of Biskind, Peter, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock'n'Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. December, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2537>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.