

Lights, Camera, Action!

By DAN MERKUR

I don't believe in cult films, at least in cult films per se, because of the bullshit inherent to cultishness. A cult film can be likened to a charismatic political leader who gains support because of his sexual/emotional appeal, and whose political theories are incoherent, or, at best, inconclusive.

(Films like those of Humphrey Bogart that gain neo-cultish following due to the independent discovery of their inherent worth are exempt; as are politicians who gain a following for their ideas, and who happen to be charismatic.)

The problem with the cult films — The Graduate, Easy Rider, Five Easy Pieces - is that their success hinges on talented and sexy actors, while what is in fact touted as their virtues are the themes and philosophies expressed, as if to say that Nicholson's winning smile, or Hoffman's lovable schlemiel weren't really the cause of the films' celebrity.

Because, you see, the themes are infantile (anal stage); and the philosophies are never expressed coherently, if at all. At best they are cryptic, enigmatic and illogical.

These are the youth-in-search-of-identity stories — the odyssey down a highway, the graduate faced with a vicarious world, the man reviewing the decisions of his youth at least, supposedly they are. Yet the identity they find is not truly found; it is an identity by virtue of abdication. The identity of Captain America is fantasy, a self formed out of rejection of established alternatives.

Nicholson in Five Easy Pieces is a hard hat - not because he enjoys it; we are shown he does not - because he does not want a genteel life as a concert musician; which was his father's ideal.

Benjamin Braddock can't be bothered even to find a negative identity: he is passive throughout. His one positive action is the final one of the film. According to Mike Nichols. The Graduate is popularly misinterpreted. Benjamin, says Nichols, is not a schlemiel; he is an opportunist and a bastard, and his final snatching of a bride is childish, selfish, and doomed to failure.

Nichols brings into question the power of film to be dynamic and charismatic, to glorify that which is shown, even when what is shown is clearly false. The philosophy of The Graduate, as intended,



Dennis Hopper, Jack Nicholson, and Peter Fonda in Easy Rider.

shows a man who uses an older woman as a sexual object (and she him, of course); who resists maturity, is a thorough bastard (refusing to get a job, and treating his folks as though they owed him everything; and he them, nothing at all); who willfully and pridefully takes what he wants when it is convenient (like a girl from the altar) even though he had had his opportunity and refused her; and who is doomed to failure.

Thus Nichols intended that we see that egocentricity grounded in fantasy is bound for failure; that in order for us to have meaningful lives, truth and reality as well as humility and charity must be our values. He failed, however, and his film shows precisely the opposite of his avowed intentions. And strangely, even though the film does not work as a failure, we accept its inconsistencies, and in spite of everything, we still think the best of Benjamin Braddock.

Easy Rider opens with cocaine smugglers at work. Can anyone justify these men, in any morality or ethic ever conceived on this planet? Yet the film makes them into Heroes, riding in glory amid misunderstanding, unsympathetic, often antagonistic, and ultimately destructive humanity.

The film-makers have distorted our perspectives, manipulated our emotions, and forced us into a position of identifying

with parasites, the agents of corruption.
And because these Heroes are killed, they become tragic figures, and we sanctify them. But it makes us hypocrites to do so. Existentialism only allows the protagonists to be heroes without moral condemnation, and existentialism also denies tragedy in their deaths. If Captain America and Billy are heroes, they are not tragic, merely existentialist; and if they are tragic, they are villains, and not subject for sympathy.

Five Easy Pieces does not have a badly expressed, cryptic and widely misunderstood philosophy as does The Graduate. Nor does it have a perverse morality/existential meaninglessness like Easy Rider. In fact it does not have a statement to make at all, and does not make one, even by accident.

What does Five Easy Pieces say? That the itinerant hard hat life is good? That the life of a musician is bad? Is good? That the protagonist is right? Wrong?

All Five Easy Pieces says is that Nicholson is unhappy with his father's values, unhappy with his lack of values, cannot stomach sophisticated artsy bit-

ches, and cannot be happy with a more ignorant, clinging girl. So what Five Easy Pieces leaves us with is not a statement, but a question, and even that question is enigmatic for the most part.

Ingmar Bergman poses the same questions, of the meaning of life and of love, of what constitutes a valid life, of who we are, and why. And Bergman asks them clearly, concisely, and in such a way that dispenses with most of the facile, inadequate answers with which we usually rationalize our way out of the uncomfortable position of being unable to find an answer, a true answer.

Why Five Easy Pieces will play for months and become a celebrated, cult film, while The Passion of Anna, Bergman's latest and best film, played for two weeks to empty houses, I do not know. I can attribute those facts only to the ignorance of the film-goers. Which is why I have written this piece.

As it stands, widely misinterpreted, The Graduate is a lie. Easy Rider is perverse as well. Five Easy Pieces is vague and nebular. By paying for these films, you encourage backers to continue to produce similar crap. Do yourself a favour, see something worthwhile for a change.

Fine Arts series

Discover ... New Music

By PATRICK KUTNEY

The concert by the Dorian Woodwind Quintet at Burton Auditorium on October 19 ushered in the 1970-1971 Performing Arts series presented at York by the Faculty of Fine Arts. This year, the Faculty of Fine Arts has chosen to present solely 20th century classical pieces in the music portion of the Series, scoveries in. . . New Music

The faculty must be admired for adhering to this maxim. 20th century classical music and its offshoot, electronic music, has never been given the support that other 20th century art forms have received. Just as painting involved into the abstracts of Picasso and his contemporaries and further, so too have classical composers come around to the point where the most radical term music as "pleasing sound" (at least to themselves).

Appreciation of modern music (post 1900) is more difficult than say, then appreciation of modern theatre. Part of this is due to lack of exposure. Radio, television, and live performances, from the solo instrument to the symphony orchestra limit the number and frequency of modern works that they play. They prefer to play pieces that are popular with the public because of repeated playings or the great number of years they have existed. It's a vicious circle.

Another stumbling block to appreciation is the music itself. In developing out of the romantic period, composers have abandoned many of the musical forms and structuring employed by their prodecessors.

Their are many new trends in this century. Impressionism and neo-classical music, with Debussy and Stravinsky as their chief exponents, respectively, was more prevalent in the earlier part of this century. 12-tone music and atonal and polytonal music seem to be the most popular forms today. The former is based on a tone-row, which is a basic melody derived from the 12 notes of the chronatic scale, while atonal music and polytonal music is music without key or in several keys at the same time.

Composers are exploring the spectrum of tonal possibilities of individual instruments and the orchestra and, sometimes, fusing native music with classical, as Japanese composer Takemitsu has done. 20th century music is fascinating, but it requires an increased awareness on the listener.

Burton was perhaps half-empty for the Dorian Quintet's performance. The disappointing turn-out is possibly partly attributable to the fact that the programme consisted of 20th century music. Certainly the excellence of the Dorian woodwind Quintet cannot be denied.

You are urged to attend the remaining concerts. A good deal of incite into 20th century music should be garnered from John Beckwith's lecture, "Radicalism in Modern Music on February 10 at Burton.

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