It is the morning of August 9, 1969. A story begins to circulate about some murders at a house in Benedict Canyon—some people everyone knows. The news spreads quickly, but not always helpfully or accurately. There are conflicting accounts, most of them pinned on the notion that the more sinister aspects of counterculture Hollywood have come home to roost. “I remember all of the day’s misinformation very clearly,” the essayist Joan Didion wrote in 1979. “And I also remember this, and I wish I did not: I remember that no one was surprised.”

The so-called Manson murders would become counterculture Hollywood’s simultaneous nadir and climax. There was one life in the Hollywood movie colony before August 1969 and another afterward. It would be impossible in the following months and years to
shake the crime’s impact, to act as if it were not somehow part of a larger story—a larger story told here, in this book.

Hollywood history is anecdotal and improvisational. (I am not apologizing; only explaining.) It is composed in large part of backstories—a malleable term encompassing production histories, star and celebrity biographies, backroom shenanigans (what industry players call “the action,” what the trades call deals). These stories take us behind the scenes into a world not so easy to fathom, a world unlike the world most of the rest of us live in. The players in play are “larger than life.” We need to keep that in mind.

In the rhetoric of Hollywood history, movie people are said to be “caught up” in events, as if drifting in the wind, as if waking from a dream. Lots of people venture to Hollywood to reinvent themselves—to get or be discovered, to become players. It happens for them or (more often) it doesn’t. And if it does (happen, that is), then they run the risk that somewhere, sometime along the way they too will get caught up in something—in another story they most likely didn’t see coming. How they react or behave while they’re caught up will be news. It will be deemed newsworthy. That is the price they pay for being larger than life, for occupying so much space in the focal point of American pop culture.

The movies—the ostensible product of Hollywood industry—are, in fact, only ever just part of the story. As objects or products they too can get caught up in things, especially when they seem to distill a given moment, when they seem to elaborate a cultural history. From the mid-sixties through the mid-seventies, the counterculture was happening all around Hollywood (and in it too), and plenty of Hollywood’s varied players dabbled or dove right in. But for the Hollywood establishment, the manifestations and crosscurrents of the counterculture proved tricky to develop or exploit. So many of its aspects were divisive and controversial, and thus problematic to promote and market.
The studios had a long-term commitment to their mass audience and by definition something counter to the dominant culture ran counter to their business plan. Today, the movies from the counterculture era that continue to matter were in their day aberrations, movies that got made despite industry policy, movies made elsewhere (overseas, in the B-industry, by independent contractors working on some half-baked deal with a studio)—movies nobody with money and clout at the time gave half a chance at success.

Between 1967 and 1976 (or thereabouts), Hollywood encountered the counterculture. A lucky few made it; they became counterculture celebrities and hung on long enough to make a name for themselves, long enough to exploit the perks of their celebrity. Others got left out, left behind, or more interestingly (for this book, anyway), walked away—as if the Hollywood they had dreamed of and somehow gained admittance into was not all it had been cracked up to be.

Oscar Night 1968: Encountering Hollywood’s First Encounters with the Counterculture

The story of the studio industry’s first significant encounter with the counterculture begins in 1964 with the screenwriters Robert Benton and David Newman shopping around a script for a film about the Depression-era bank robbers Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow. Figuring no one in Hollywood would understand their French New Wave–inspired script; they try to interest the director François Truffaut. The three men meet, and then retire to a screening of the Joseph Lewis noir picture, *Gun Crazy*. The writers figure they’ve got a deal. But they don’t, as Truffaut reconsiders and decides instead to make *Fahrenheit 451*.

Elinor and Norton Wright, the producers of the kiddie TV show *Captain Kangaroo*, option the script. With the Wrights’ blessing, Benton and Newman contact Jean-Luc Godard, who loves the script
and wants to start production immediately. The Wrights tell Godard they don’t have the money yet. They can’t start production without a distribution deal. Benton adds that they will need to wait for spring anyway, that the weather in Texas in winter is not suitable for production. Godard replies, “Who cares about Texas.” He tells Benton he can make the film anywhere, even Tokyo. Benton cringes. Someone calls for a weather report in Texas, which exasperates Godard: “I’m talking about cinema and you’re talking about meteorology.”
When the Wrights decide not to renew the option, Warren Beatty steps in. He meets with Godard. It does not go well. He then meets with Jack Warner, who, because Beatty is Beatty—that is, a movie star—offers modest financing: $1.7 million. Beatty ponies up the rest. The production decamps to West Texas, far from the prying eyes of the studio.

Several months later Beatty returns to Los Angeles to screen the rough cut. Warner hates it and shouts at Beatty: “What the fuck is this?” Beatty replies, “It is an homage”—to the classic 1930s Warner Bros. gangster films. Warner again: “What the fuck is an homage?”

In August 1967, Bonnie and Clyde opens in a limited release—Warner sees to that. And the film receives poor reviews from the old guard critics. Bosley Crowther at the New York Times dismisses the “callous and callow” film as “an embarrassing addition to an excess of violence on the screen.” At Newsweek, Joseph Morgenstern describes the film as “a squalid shoot-em-up for the moron trade.” Then, at his wife (the actress) Piper Laurie’s insistence, Morgenstern gives Bonnie and Clyde a second chance, this time in a theater with a mostly young audience that absolutely loves the film. Morgenstern pens a retraction. The film’s fortunes begin to shift.

For the cover of their December 8, 1967, New Hollywood issue, Time magazine commissions a Robert Rauschenberg collage, which the artist assembles from production stills from Bonnie and Clyde. A few months later, on Oscar night 1968, the film is up for ten Academy Awards. (It wins two.)

In its initial run, Bonnie and Clyde grossed nearly twenty-five times its production budget. It is for Hollywood quite clearly a watershed. But no one at Warner Bros. or at any of the other studios seems to have the slightest idea how or why.

Jack Warner was well into his fifth decade in charge of the family business when Penn and Beatty’s film so took him by surprise. He had been running things ever since the studio first experimented
with sound, way back when one of the lies executives liked to tell the press, studio talent, and themselves, was that they had “the whole equation” in their heads. That is: a feel for trends, fads, the zeitgeist—a firm grasp of the math (money out and money in). Wishful thinking.

Mike Nichols’s *The Graduate* received seven Oscar nominations in 1968. The film was for Hollywood a preliminary narrative exploration of the emerging youth counterculture disguised as a satire of postwar suburbia—an outpost populated in the film by an array of upper-middle-class pseudo-liberals and their offspring: the latter, depicted as a generation adrift, paralyzed by counterculture ennui. The romantic triangle at the heart of the narrative (Ben, Mrs. Robinson, and her daughter Elaine) anticipated the advent of a new regime of film industry censorship (itself an anticipation of social change, a response to the dawning Age of Aquarius). Ben’s transition into adulthood runs counter to his upper-middle-class suburban parents’ dreamy life and ambitious plans for him—plans epitomized and satirized by the notion that the secret to America’s future might be contained in a single, whispered word: “plastics.” Asked early on what’s troubling him, Ben tells his father: “I’m worried about the future—I want it to be different.” By the time we get to the church at the end of the film, we understand why.

Nichols was thirty-six when he made *The Graduate*—for the record, the same age as Anne Bancroft, the actress who played the icon of the affluent and amoral establishment in the film, Mrs. Robinson. (Bancroft was just six years older than Dustin Hoffman, who plays Ben—hardly old enough to be his mother. Just saying.) Nichols was not a baby boomer, and he was not and did not aspire to be a counterculture filmmaker. He was a former sketch comedian, for years partnering with Elaine May. He had recently enjoyed some success as a Broadway stage director with two (what were even then)

Nichols’s first big Hollywood break came as a result of canny networking; the movie industry was then and still is a relationship business. While working and living in New York, Nichols became friends with the movie stars Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. When Taylor and Burton got tied to a film adaptation of Edward Albee’s stage play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* for Warners, the actors listed Nichols as a director they’d be willing to work with. The studio hired Nichols to keep the star couple happy. And Nichols made the most of the opportunity.

*The Graduate* was Nichols’s second film. And, like *Bonnie and Clyde*, it was a box-office sensation: off a modest budget of $3 million, the film grossed in excess of $80 million domestically and over $100 million globally, astonishing numbers at a time when a $20 million gross qualified a film as a blockbuster. Nichols’s film was timely and though essentially a comedy, politically complex. The May-December romance between Ben (Dustin Hoffman) and Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft) that seemed so shocking at the time was for Nichols at once a modern take on the age-old bedroom farce and a commentary on the current generation gap. Mrs. Robinson is one of Ben’s parents’ friends. She seduces Ben because she despises growing old—because she hates her cushy suburban life with her bourbon-swilling, golf-playing, white-collar husband. She’s mostly missed out on the sexual revolution, and she figures Ben is her one last chance to dip in.

The relationship offers for Ben a jolting rite of passage, especially after they split up and Mrs. Robinson becomes a formidable adversary. By then, Mrs. Robinson is something of a caricature—a rather monstrous symbol of an unhappy and lost older generation. Our last images of her at the wedding are meant to exaggerate her failure, her
futility, and her hypocrisy. She has treated her own marriage with disrespect, yet she has pushed her daughter into the same unsatisfying institution, into marrying a man she doesn’t love. Mrs. Robinson wants to be young again, she wants to be part of a counterculture she’s only just read about in magazines, a subculture of casual hook-ups and free sex. She doesn’t find what she’s looking for. And sadly, Nichols gets us to hate her for trying.

The Graduate ends with a darkly comic set piece: after Ben breaks up the wedding, he and Elaine sit together in the back of a bus, in and of itself (after Rosa Parks) hardly an inadvertent set piece. Seated side by side and captured in a long-take two-shot, they acknowledge through gesture their confusion. This final sequence takes us back to Ben’s earlier ruminations in his bedroom at home. He is, he tells his father, worried about the future. He—and here we begin to understand, he is not just speaking for himself—wants things to be different. But he has no idea how to make that happen.

The closest he comes to having a postgraduation plan involves moving to a rented room in a Berkeley boarding house—the better to stalk Elaine into falling back in love with him. (To state the obvious,
the scenes of stalking played differently in 1967 than they do today.) The landlord, performed with bug-eyed comic exaggeration by Norman Fell, is anxious about Ben, not because he knows what Ben is up to, but because he’s afraid Ben is an “outside agitator” come to stir things up in America’s most notorious counterculture college town. Fell makes the most of his brief screen time, and he becomes the fall guy in a series of comic skits. But plenty of older filmgoers shared his anxiety at what was happening in Berkeley and on other college campuses at the time. All to say, in 1967 the Berkeley setting is hardly incidental.

Along with The Graduate and Bonnie and Clyde, two other films scored big on Oscar night 1968: the topical comedy Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner (Stanley Kramer) and the trenchant crime-melodrama In the Heat of the Night (Norman Jewison), which won Best Picture. All four films were in different ways “counterculture”: timely, hip, and political. It was hard for the studio suits to ignore that fact. The fifth and final nominee for Best Picture was the old-fashioned, old-Hollywood Dr. Doolittle, directed by Richard Fleischer, a costly and clunky mess that seemed only to emphasize the industry’s counter-culture rift.

Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner (Stanley Kramer, 1967), the year’s second-highest-grossing film behind The Graduate, and In the Heat of the Night both starred the Black movie star Sidney Poitier. Kramer’s film cast Poitier alongside Old-Hollywood stalwarts Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. The film asked a series of topical questions necessarily (per the studio’s collective caution) tempered by light comedy. What would a white liberal couple say if their daughter brought home her fiancé and he was Black? And what if he looked like (what if he was someone like) Poitier—handsome, urbane, intelligent? And what if, as the film further poses, he was an MD with a practice in Switzerland? Didn’t every married couple in 1967 dream of their daughters marrying doctors?
In the Heat of the Night cast Poitier as a police detective who ventures into the racially segregated South and gets recruited to solve a murder. His task is complicated by a bigoted southern lawman (played by Rod Steiger, who won the Oscar for Best Actor) and by the many racists who occupy the town. The film ends with an unlikely détente possible only in Hollywood’s dream version of race relations in late-sixties America.

The box office and Oscar night success of In the Heat of the Night, Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, The Graduate, and Bonnie and Clyde spoke to the counterculture predicament in Hollywood at the time. There was, it became quite clear, money to be made and awards to be won making movies that engaged a counterculture audience. But how then to proceed without alienating the so-called silent majority, the establishment folks who in 1968 put Nixon in the White House? It was a question the studio establishment could not answer.

Black Hollywood: Melvin van Peebles’s Road to Nowhere

It is (or at least it should be) a source of shame that the movie industry labor force, especially at the top end, was as late as 1968 not yet integrated. And even as white celebrities like Marlon Brando and Paul Newman spoke out on behalf of Black Americans (more on that later), the studios remained cautious about dealing with race on-screen. And they had their reasons. Case in point: the 1965 MGM release, A Patch of Blue (Guy Green), which featured an interracial romance between an illiterate, blind, white woman (Elizabeth Hartman) and an educated Black man (Poitier, again). A budding romance was confirmed by an on-screen kiss between the two characters (and stars)—well: they kissed in some versions that some filmgoers saw at some venues. Under pressure from theater owners in the South, MGM distributed an alternate version of the film with the kiss cut out. Two years later: Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner and
In the Heat of the Night were for the moment—arguably, despite the moment—still as far as the studios were willing to go.

In 1969, Black Americans accounted for about 15 percent of the US population. Yet they comprised more than 30 percent of the first-run film audience. Black Americans went to the movies proportionally more than white Americans did. Encouraged by the data and the Best Picture win for In the Heat of the Night, studio executives moved cautiously into making movies targeting the Black American audience. They had gotten their feet wet with Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner and In the Heat of the Night and in 1969 they were ready to get in a bit deeper—to their ankles, let’s say. To do so, they invested in a small and select group of Black moviemakers.7

Among this first group, Melvin van Peebles seems today the most interesting and most important—if only because, to extend the metaphor, with him Hollywood was never just wading in. His story—sudden success followed by a self-inflicted career implosion—was
an all-too typical counterculture venture on the road to nowhere. As such, it surely and sadly fits the scheme of this book.

In 1967, after failing to interest a single A- or B-studio in a script based on his novel *La Permission*, van Peebles signed a production deal with the small French company O.P.E.R.A. The retitled adaptation, *The Story of a Three-Day Pass*, told the story of a mild-mannered African American GI stationed in France, who, to celebrate a promotion, takes a rare weekend off the base. On the first day of his three-day pass, he meets a white French shop girl. When she offers to go with him to a resort hotel, he assumes she is a prostitute. She’s not, but as they discover together, they both would have been better off had she been one.

Anticipating the release of the film, *Variety* ran a feature on van Peebles under the now well-dated headline: “Saga of a Negro Filmmaker.” Rick Setlowe, writing for the trade paper, opened the feature with a fair (thus, cynical) assessment: “The irony is that the novelist-filmmaker [van Peebles] had to exile himself to France to work at all, and the story of his struggle is a commentary on how tough it can be for a talented Negro to break into the film biz.” Setlowe highlighted van Peebles’s CV: a BA with Honors in literature from Ohio Wesleyan; a stint in the Air Force; a job as a cable-car operator in San Francisco; and, on money earned from selling his car, the producer of three short self-financed films. Van Peebles, Setlowe reported, took his reel to a number of Hollywood executives and agents, but failed to drum up interest. One agent told him, memorably: “If you can tap dance, I might be able to find you some work.”

*The Story of a Three-Day Pass* somehow got van Peebles noticed. And his timing seemed right; he (to indulge the industry use of the term) had “arrived” just as executives were trying build upon *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* and *In the Heat of the Night*, and he was given a shot at a studio feature: *The Watermelon Man* (1970). The