

Here Comes the Sun:
Documentary Cinema's New Morning in America

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Abstract: The question of whether and how the 1970s “pseudo-documentaries” of Sunn Classic Pictures not only reflect but promote the larger cultural and political shift that took place in the United States throughout the decade is explored. A discursive analysis of seven Sunn films is performed in order to document a case study of the company and its products. The results show that the company’s chief executive, Charles E. Sellier, by way of becoming one of the most successful independent film producers of all time, effectively tapped into the desire of a growing number of Americans for relief from troubling news, the sort reported in documentaries of the ‘60s and, to a lesser extent, the ‘70s. Cinema’s role in informing the study of journalism is discussed, as is the sense in which the Sunn films opposed the tradition of muckraking documentary cinema and promoted New Right and evangelical Christian ideology.

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Chapter 1: Proof! Neo-Con Pseudo-Docs Invaded the '70s!

1a. Introduction

In 1973, the year that Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal hit the fan in the United States, the poster for the film *Chariots of the Gods* asked the important questions of the era. "Did spacemen visit earth in ancient times?" "Was God an astronaut?" And then the sales pitch. "Based on the book that shattered conventional theories of history and archaeology!"¹

The distributor of the film — the Salt Lake City-based Sunn Classic Pictures, founded in 1971 and known as a Mormon organization² — went on from its success with the U.S. release of the West German *Chariots* to specialize in producing what its executives called "speculative documentaries"³ — films designed to shatter conventional theories, one could say.

These crudely made, journalistically fanciful films included *In Search of Noah's Ark* (1976), a Christian neo-con pseudo-doc that bids to "examine the historical accuracy of the Bible" (and may, according to its narrator, be the "most

¹ Original theatrical poster for *Chariots of the Gods* (1973). Sunn Classic Pictures. Retrieved on April 10, 2014 at http://www.impawards.com/1974/chariots_of_the_gods.html.

² Morrisroe, Patricia. (1980, February 3). Making movies the computer way. *Parade*, p. 16.

³ Sunn Classic Pictures website. Retrieved on January 10, 2014 at www.sunnclassicpicturesinc.com/history.html.

incredible film you will ever see”)⁴; *In Search of Historic Jesus* (1979), a promo tool disguised as documentary, boasting that “Christianity has grown from a handful of disciples to one of the world’s major religious forces”⁵; *The Lincoln Conspiracy* (1977), which Sunn promised would “make Watergate look like kindergarten plotting”⁶; and, with cameo appearances by Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, and the Abominable Snowman, *The Mysterious Monsters* (1975), whose printed PR included this carnival bark of a tagline: “Proof! There are giant creatures living at the edge of our civilization!”⁷

Patently absurd as Sunn’s product appears (and is), it was hardly inconsequential to American culture of the time, particularly if one calculates the impact of a message using its audience size and/or sales figures (e.g., measuring a film’s effect with box-office receipts). Indeed, between 1974 and 1980, Sunn Classic Pictures produced an unbroken string of 17 hit features, each averaging an astonishing \$14 million in ticket sales⁸ — all of which went straight to the company (for unusual reasons explained below).

In Search of Noah’s Ark — shot, like many of the company’s films, with small casts of little-known actors and non-union crews — was produced in 1976 for

⁴ Conway, James L. and Charles E. Sellier, Jr. *In Search of Noah’s Ark*. VHS. Directed by Conway. Salt Lake City: Sunn Classic Pictures, 1976.

⁵ Jacobs, Jack and Lee Roddy, Charles E. Sellier, Jr., Robert Starling, Malvin Wald. *In Search of Historic Jesus*. VHS. Directed by Henning Schellerup. Salt Lake City: Sunn Classic Pictures, 1979.

⁶ Estill, Robert. (1977, August 16). Cover-Up in Plotting of Lincoln Assassination? *Mt. Vernon Register-News*, p. 8A.

⁷ Original theatrical poster for *The Mysterious Monsters* (1975). Sunn Classic Pictures. Retrieved on April 10, 2014 at <http://cinematicobsessive.blogspot.com/2011/03/tuesdays-overlooked-films-mysterious.html>.

⁸ Morrisroe, p. 16.

\$360,000; its gross in the United States is an estimated \$28 million⁹. *Noah's Ark* is the 11th top-grossing documentary of all time; *In Search of Historic Jesus*, made and released by Sunn in 1979, grossed \$22.4 million, making it the second most successful of Sunn's pictures.¹⁰

This unprecedented degree of box-office success within the field of documentary film clearly mirrors the financial triumph of publications such as the so-called McDonald's of news, *USA Today* — founded in 1982 and fit to serve as the ideal symbol of U.S. journalism in the period of its move away from hard-hitting investigation and toward infotainment.

In this thesis, I argue that, with intention or not, Sunn's collective team of executives, publicists, writers, producers and directors succeeded with its "documentaries" in perpetrating a curious form of anti-journalism — this at a time, following Watergate and the end of war in Vietnam, when politicians and ordinary citizens of the U.S. alike had begun to devalue the press while drifting rightward, a move culminating in the 1980 election of former actor Ronald Reagan as president.

My research question in the thesis is whether and how the Sunn films not only reflect but promote the larger cultural and political shift that took place throughout the decade of the 1970s — a shift away from journalistic investigation and toward the soothing escapism of fantasy, nostalgia and pseudo-documentary. Primary source material includes the scarcely available films themselves, the close

⁹ Morrisroe, p. 16.

¹⁰ The Internet Movie Database. Retrieved on January 10, 2014 at www.imdb.com.

reading of which will enable an historical narrative that mirrors and elucidates other accounts of politics, journalism and cinema in the '70s-era United States.

In the course of discussing Sunn's films, I intend to suggest ways in which journalism and cinema both shape and reflect the political climate of a given time. The thesis will show that film, particularly nonfiction film, can inform the study of journalism, in part through the scholar's recognition of the mediums' shared properties, uses, and meanings within a political context. Indeed, there are elements of the thesis that argue for the wider recognition of film *as* journalism. Thus the thesis answers the question of why journalism scholars would and should be concerned with film and film studies.

With this thesis, I am seeking to enrich the historical study of journalism in the U.S. by enhancing the reader's sense of how traditions of sociopolitically critical reportage as embodied in the strongest works of '70s nonfiction film — including unflattering exposes of American military activity in the Vietnam War (e.g., *The Selling of the Pentagon*, *Winter Soldier*, *Hearts and Minds*) — gave way to a climate, still much in evidence today, in which the terms of reportage were dictated less by the investigative impulses of journalists than by the needs of government, economic interests and consumers for a relatively deferential and obeisant press.

With regard specifically to Sunn, I found support for my hypothesis that the company's chief executive, Charles E. Sellier, by way of becoming one of the most successful independent film producers of all time, effectively tapped into the desire of a growing number of Americans for relief from troubling news, the sort reported in documentaries of the '60s and, to a lesser extent, the '70s. In this, Sellier is a figure

perhaps not unlike Reagan and his neo-conservative colleagues of the time. (Alas, information about Sellier's political and financial affiliations has thus far remained largely elusive; what is known will be presented below.)

Finally, from the standpoints of cinema studies and journalism studies, the thesis will show that, if the massively successful *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) are widely seen as having radically altered the course of American commercial film — away from discomfiting ambiguity and toward narratives of decisive victory enjoyed as if through predestination by boyish white male heroes — so the Sunn films deserve recognition, popular and scholarly, for having decisively opposed the tradition of muckraking documentary cinema in favor of something more closely resembling an action movie — particularly an action movie, like many since the late '70s, whose formal qualities can be shown to align with New Right ideology.

1b. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

In this thesis, I conducted a discursive analysis of seven Sunn films produced in the 1970s in order to document a case study of Sunn Classic Pictures, using heretofore unexamined materials in order to speculate informatively on the role that Sunn's motion pictures played in the turbulent 1970s, and on the reasons why the films have resisted the kind of serious examination they clearly seem to warrant. I researched Sunn's publicity and press coverage of the '70s via volumes of the *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature*, and collected, through eBay and Amazon.com, rare VHS copies of Sunn features, using the videos as documents to study closely

how the films' content and cinematic style reflects neo-conservative values, including the implicit agenda to diminish the sociocultural esteem and political capital of investigative journalism.

The seven Sunn features analyzed here were produced and distributed between 1974 and 1979. Those films, each of which runs between 85 and 110 minutes, are: *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams* (1974), *The Mysterious Monsters* (1975), *The Amazing World of Psychic Phenomena* (1976), *In Search of Noah's Ark* (1976), *Beyond and Back* (1978), *In Search of Historic Jesus* (1979) and *Beyond Death's Door* (1979).

When I say that I am analyzing a Sunn film, what I mean is that I am surveying the film for evidence of how its form and its content work together to construct ideological meaning. In terms of methodology, I employ discursive transcoding, the process used by Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner in *Camera Politica*, their book on '70s and '80s American cinema. Discursive transcoding, the authors write, is the process by which the relationship between film and social history can be conceived.

As Ryan and Kellner explain:

We [employ discursive transcoding] in order to emphasize the connections between the representations operative in film and the representations which give structure and shape to social life. Social life consists of discourses that determine the substance and form of the everyday world. For example, the discourse of technocratic capitalism, with its ideals of progress and modernization, embodies certain material interests, but it also consists of representations that shape and transform the social world... One's being is thus shaped by the representations of oneself and of the world that one holds, and one's life can be described in terms of the figures or shapes which social life assumes as a result of the representations that prevail in a culture. Films transcode the discourses (the forms, figures, and representations) of social life into cinematic narratives. Rather than reflect a reality external to the film medium, films execute a transfer from one discursive field to another. As

a result, films themselves become part of that broader cultural system of representations that construct social reality.¹¹

In screening the films, I sought to identify those moments in which the key political issues of the time appeared to be addressed by the films' sounds, words, and signifying images. In terms of the films' (tenuous) relationship to nonfiction cinema, which I interpret as journalism by "other" means (i.e., with a camera instead of a typewriter), I looked for examples of how muckraking had been replaced by a rhetorical strategy much closer to propaganda.

By engaging in cultural studies and historical work around cinematic texts that have been all but neglected by critics and scholars, my thesis adds to the body of literature that deals with 1970s American political message making. Where the scholarly narrative of Hollywood blockbusters' role in shaping and reflecting the mid- to late-'70s American zeitgeist has been well established (in part by Ryan and Kellner's book), this thesis seeks to fill an important gap by extending the work of cinematic analysis to the realm of nonfiction — or, more accurately in the case of Sunn's films, pseudo-documentary.

I believe that studying Sunn's product, whose scarcity requires the scholar to act as a kind of investigative journalist him or herself, is important to the further development of scholarly work around the examination of the complex interplay between culture and politics in the 1970s. The thesis asserts that while the

¹¹ Kellner, Douglas and Michael Ryan. (1988). *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 12-14.

politically progressive tradition of U.S. documentary is well known, there is also an ideologically conservative strain of documentary that has been woefully neglected.

In the next section, I will look closely at Sunn Classic Pictures in terms of its historical and media contexts in order to characterize the company as one whose products both reflected and shaped the course of key '70s shifts in the realms of journalism, politics and religion, and cinema.

Chapter 2: Sunn Rise: The Historical and Media Contexts of Sunn Classic Pictures

While it isn't the goal of this thesis to attempt to prove that Sunn's filmmakers were fully conscious of their agenda to provide relief from troubling news and cultural mores, neither do I mean to discount 1970s newspaper and magazine reportage of Sunn's aesthetic and economic strategies of the period.

As the *Washington Post* wrote of the Sunn chief's ambition: "[Charles E.] Sellier [Jr.] hopes Sunn Classic is the forebear of a new entertainment industry that will shed the show-business image [of] immorality and general sleaziness."¹² The paper quoted Sellier reflecting, rather revealingly, on the creation of 1974's *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams* (which, by 1977, had taken in \$24 million on a production cost of \$125,000¹³).

"When I got into the business," Sellier said, "everyone said you couldn't make money with a G rated film. But I gave them Grizzly Adams — nonviolent, nonsexual, just a guy walking around with a bear with a smile on his face..."¹⁴ (*Grizzly Adams*, a revealing narrative precursor to Sunn's string of pseudo-docs, will be discussed at length in the findings section.)

Interestingly, scholarly interest in the company has appeared nonexistent save for two cases: an event organized a few years ago by critic and curator Ed

¹² Kotkin, Joel. (1977, December 18). Family Films Score. *Washington Post*, p. 10.

¹³ Edgerton, Gary. (1982, October). Charles E. Sellier, Jr. and Sunn Classic Pictures: Success as a Commercial Independent in the 1970s. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, p. 116.

¹⁴ Kotkin, p. 10.

Halter, who examined the success of Sunn and its imitators in an “illustrated lecture and clip show” whose publicity materials promised that Halter, in search of reasons for the “curious success of Sunn and its numerous imitators,” would be “revisiting a markedly different era of film distribution and analyzing the longstanding appeal of fringe metaphysics in the information age”;¹⁵ and Gary Edgerton’s 1982 study of Sellier and Sunn in the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, including his brief but worthy suggestion that *In Search of Noah’s Ark*, et al. might be at least as worthy of study as *Jaws*.¹⁶

A word on *Jaws*: Saluting the post-Vietnam white male victory over a scarcely seen “eating machine,” *Jaws* is a cine-political touchstone, one that has seemed to keep some cinema studies departments afloat all by itself. Of the movie, Frederic Jameson, in “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” writes: “[The film] is...an excellent example, not merely of ideological manipulation, but also of the way in which genuine social and historical content must be first tapped and given some initial expression if it is subsequently to be the object of successful manipulation and containment.”¹⁷ Jameson’s take on *Jaws* helps one to ground his or her conception of the recuperative impulse behind American pop culture post-Vietnam War and –Watergate; more specifically with regard to Sunn, it is useful toward one’s understanding of “tapping” and “expressing” as key to that company’s work as well,

¹⁵ Blue Sunshine. (2010). *In Search of Sunn: A multimedia presentation by critic/curator Ed Halter*. Retrieved January 10, 2014 from: <http://www.blue-sunshine.com/arthouse-avant-garde-reader/events/in-search-of-sunn-a-multimedia-presentation-by-criticcurator-ed-halter.html>.

¹⁶ Edgerton, p. 110.

¹⁷ Jameson, Frederic. (1979). “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” in *The Jameson Reader* (Hardt, Michael and Kathi Weeks, eds.). Blackwell Publishing: Maiden, MA. p. 142.

particularly to the Sunn films' articulation of neo-conservative and/or Mormon values.

Sunn, in its time, did manage to earn some recognition for its innovative and financially shrewd distribution policies — chiefly its practice of “four-walling” theaters, i.e., renting them from theater owners for a flat fee in trade for keeping a highly unusual 100 percent of the ticket revenue.¹⁸ Reviews of the films themselves were rather scathing (if not often enjoyably so), although stronger press came when those who'd paid attention to box-office charts deigned to weigh in. Writing in 1982, Edgerton asserted — “quite frankly,” in his words — that Sellier was the “most creative business entrepreneur to emerge in the American movie business in the last decade.”¹⁹

So, too, when *Variety* listed its “Champs Among Bantamweights” in July of 1981, Sellier's name appeared on the list more than that of any producer; included in the trade paper's list of top 50 films were nine Sellier productions.²⁰ Perhaps even more impressive is that no less an American artist than Orson Welles apparently told Sellier, “Young man, you are light years ahead of the rest of the industry.”²¹

Sellier also earned favorable notices when he traveled, er, beyond death's door in 2011. “Some aspiring filmmakers looked at the drive-in circuit and saw an opportunity for gore and sexploitation,” wrote J.R. Taylor in his Sellier obituary in Birmingham's *Black and White*. “Charles E. Sellier, Jr., saw an opportunity for family

¹⁸ Beaupre, Lee. (1978, September/October). Industry. *Film Comment*, p. 68.

¹⁹ Edgerton, p. 116.

²⁰ Magnuson, Julie. Charles E. Sellier Jr. Biography. Retrieved on January 10, 2014 from: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0783398/bio>

²¹ Edgerton, p. 110.

fare with an exploitive edge, and he became the Roger Corman of movies most likely to be played in a church auditorium.”²²

Religion, as referenced in the journalist’s zippy quote, is hardly incidental to the Sunn story. In 1980, Sellier — characterized in the *Washington Post* as a “Mormon studio technician with a 10th grade education” before he started with Sunn ²³ — told *Parade* magazine that he owed his great success to God and “the computer.”²⁴ Indeed, the Sunn films evince a seemingly divine will to put pseudo-scientific “data” to dubious use.

In those few available newspaper and magazine articles containing quotes from Sellier, articles I found in a search of the *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature*, he appears defensive on the subject of Sunn’s particular methods — and no wonder.

I should say to you that I have been attacked over the years as being a thought control expert, as being one [who] allows computers to dictate what we’re going to consume. Well, to begin with I think you know enough about computers to know [that] all it is is an accounting machine that just runs programs that you create. As far as dictating to people what they’re going to see, it can’t be done. Many people have run massive advertising campaigns only to find that no one showed up. So all that I do is try to determine with some degree of accuracy what people feel, what they want to consume from an entertainment point of view. The position I’ve taken — this is entertainment...and I want to know what emotions are they [in the potential audience] trying to feel? What things are they trying to turn on within themselves that cause them to go to the movies? That’s what, to some degree, I’ve been able to measure...²⁵

Most of what is known about Sellier’s background comes from Edgerton’s “Charles E. Sellier, Jr. and Sunn Classic Pictures: Success as a Commercial Independent in the 1970s,” published in the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* in

²² Taylor, J.R. (2012, January 16). Dead Folks 2011: Film and Television. *Black and White*. Retrieved on April 10, 2014 at <http://www.bwcitypaper.com/Articles-Special-Section-i-2012-01-26-245545.113121-Dead-Folks-2011-Film-and-Television.html>.

²³ Kotkin, p. 10.

²⁴ Morrisroe, p. 16.

²⁵ Edgerton, p. 114.

1982. After opining that Sunn’s “content reflected [Sellier’s] religious orientation,” Edgerton writes that Sellier became a convert to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints after the divorce of his parents when he was 12 years old. He was born, per Edgerton, a “Roman Catholic of Louisiana Cajun ancestry in 1939... He dropped out of school in the tenth grade, never to return; that same year, he and his wife of 24 years were married at the age of 15.”²⁶

In 1971, Sellier — who began his professional career as a technician and salesman for a film supply services company in Denver — was hired by American National Enterprises, a Salt Lake City firm that produced, marketed and distributed films. As Edgerton writes, American National Enterprises is important to the Sellier story because “it is the company that originated ‘four-walling,’ a strategy for distributing and exhibiting films that later would prove crucial to Sellier’s success with Sunn Classic Pictures,” which he joined in 1974. (After a year in existence as Mel Hardman Productions, the Utah-based Sunn was acquired in 1972 by the Schick Investment Company, which also owned, per Edgerton, the Schick razor operation, two Schick Shadel alcohol addiction hospitals, and 34 weight control and smoking clinics.²⁷)

“[B]eing a small company,” Sellier told Edgerton in 1982, “we play market by market. We didn’t break the whole nation at the same time. We would make, say, 25 prints or maybe 50 prints and go to this market and play it, and then go to that

²⁶ Edgerton, p. 113.

²⁷ Edgerton, p. 106.

market. And after we got a few bucks, we maybe went up to 100 prints, but nothing like the 1,200 or 1,500 prints that it takes to break the nation.”²⁸

Edgerton writes that television had “proven to be the crucial component in [Sunn’s] advertising equation,” chiefly because the American public had been conditioned by the major studios’ use of mass TV advertising to regard all films thusly promoted, even or especially Sunn’s, as carrying a certain prestige factor.

“If a movie was previewed on television,” Edgerton writes, “the American public was immediately cued to its apparent importance. Consequently, Sellier and Sunn Classic Pictures were able to play upon this pre-conditioned attitude for most of the decade, hyping their low budget offerings.”²⁹

After the release of *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams* in 1974, Sellier did “some in-depth market research” and discovered, or so he claimed, that a “major segment of the audience that went to see *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams* also owned campers and trailers, also visited national parks with regularity, also loved the outdoors...”

I didn’t even know what a target audience was at the time. We obviously now make every picture with a target audience... There are multitudes of target audiences, all ranging from one million to one hundred million people. You can play to all of those audiences, but you must play to them with a budget that relates to the number of potential audiences there is to go back to your movie... We aren’t a large company and do not have all the money in the world. We tend to have budgets that range from, let’s say these days, \$500,000 to a top of \$2 million. A \$500,000 budget would allow us to go to a much more limited audience, and say do a picture about miracles. Most people would say — I do not want to go to the movies and see a movie about miracles — but yet there is a target audience, that maybe for a half-million dollars you can get your money back, make a buck, and go do another one, and they love you for the rest of their lives because once a year, once every two years, they’ll go and see one of these...”³⁰

²⁸ Edgerton, p. 108.

²⁹ Edgerton, p. 115.

³⁰ Edgerton, p. 109.

Edgerton writes, “[Sunn’s] product, its target audiences, and many of its methods of production, distribution, advertising, marketing, and exhibition are all markedly different from the rest of American commercial cinema... [S]ellier spent nearly \$5 million developing his computerized test marketing system... [T]he public not only pinpoints [the] subjects that it wants to see, but it also signals the scriptwriters at Sunn Classics to how they want the plot to be played out...

“[S]ellier’s pretesting as early as 1974 and 1975 indicated that America’s moviegoing public would then be responsive to science fiction and space adventure movies... [T]hrough computer pretesting, Sellier and Sunn Classics can pinpoint exactly where their target audience lives. For instance, a film like *In Search of Historic Jesus* may test positively throughout most of the South and the Midwest, while simultaneously producing lukewarm and negative reactions from the major urban centers along the eastern seaboard, like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.”³¹

It should be said that Sunn’s audacious methods — not of researching the films per se, but of researching the films’ potential audiences in advance of production, effectively getting members of its target audience to work for the company as unpaid trendspotters — is highly unusual within documentary cinema: Warner Bros. may have test-marketed *Woodstock* before rolling the cameras in 1969, but never before had creators of American independent documentary cinema worked so strenuously to stimulate grosses, even tailoring the shape of its “investigations” to audience tastes.

³¹ Edgerton, p. 106.

At Sunn, Sellier pioneered the practice of audience polling during pre-production to determine a film's general approach to a given subject. (The phone survey budget of a Sunn film of the late-'70s is estimated to have been \$85,000.³²) The company's questions were used to probe "potential moviegoers on unusual ideas, newspaper articles, current books, or anything else that might get them out of the house and into the theatre."³³

Summarizing Sellier's data gathering techniques, Edgerton offers that, "[t]heoretically, [Sellier has] structured his test marketing system in such a way that the films that are produced along the data-based guidelines should actually resemble a near-perfect 'mirror' of the ideology and values of its target audience."³⁴

Exactly who were the members of this target audience? Clues can be found in the 1970s rise of the anti-secular, culture-warring religious right as chronicled by Daniel K. Williams in *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*.

In the early 1960s, Supreme Court rulings against school prayer and Bible reading alarmed many conservative Protestants who began to see the secularization of the country—an idea that had been unimaginable in the 1950s—as a distinct possibility... [B]y the end of the 1960s, their fear of cooperating with Catholics had dissipated in the midst of their concerns over secularism and moral decline. The sexual revolution, sex education, race riots, the counterculture, increases in drug use, and the beginning of the feminist movement convinced them that the nation had lost its Christian identity and that the family was under attack... They created their own educational institutions, launched nationally syndicated television shows, and wrote best-selling books... [E]vangelical congregations enjoyed rapid growth.³⁵

³² Austin, Bruce A. (1988). *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co, p. 241.

³³ Morrisroe, p. 16.

³⁴ Edgerton, p. 111.

³⁵ Williams, Daniel K. (2010). *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 5-6.

With regard to what could be thought of as Sunn’s anti-journalism agenda, one revealing story, reported by Patricia Morrisroe in *Parade*, concerns the company’s alleged research on behalf of a film that, for whatever reason, was never actually made. Brian Russell, screenwriter of an unfilmed docudrama on the assassination of JFK called *The President Must Die*, acknowledged that his take on the subject had been market-researched in advance.

“After feeding our data into the computer,” Russell said, rather nondescriptly, “we went with the conspiracy theory — the premise that was closest to what the majority believed.”³⁶

In other words, this was journalism as dictated, to the greatest achievable extent, by the desired consumer — and thus can be seen as an early example of what has by now become a trend or, arguably, even a standard in the United States.

Russell claimed that he and his Sunn colleagues were “interested in drama, not politics.”³⁷ Be that as it may, the view of this thesis is that the story of Sunn and its wildly successful product should be seen as inseparable from that of politics — specifically, the United States’ diminishing esteem for investigative journalism and overall rightward turn as the 1970s progressed.

In the next section of the thesis, I will draw on the work of historians and critics to characterize the ‘70s shift from left to right within the realms of journalism, politics and religion, and popular cinema.

³⁶ Morrisroe, p. 16.

³⁷ Morrisroe, p. 16.

Chapter 3: From Muckraking to Mush, Real Loss to Fantasized Recovery

3a. U.S. Journalism of the 1970s

In *Watergate's Legacy and the Press: The Investigative Impulse* (2011), Northwestern University lecturer Jon Marshall makes early use of media scholar Michael Schudson's lofty yet plausible conclusion about the Watergate scandal: "No other story in American history features the press in so prominent and heroic a role."³⁸ Indeed, as a seismic event within American politics and journalism of the time, Watergate has often been used by cultural historians as a tool with which to extract the most enticing narratives of U.S. journalism as it evolved — many would say declined — throughout the '70s. As Marshall puts it, "Watergate unleashed forces that fed a growing public mistrust of journalists."³⁹

The Sunn films can and should be seen as tapping into and giving voice to that mistrust in various ways. Indeed, part of the goal of this thesis is to argue that the company gave viewers what they wanted — and not only by filling requests gathered during "research."

To this end, it seems important to characterize some of what demanded soothing in the '70s. Certainly press coverage of the '60s and '70s had felt cumulatively burdensome to many Americans. There was, after all, "the Bay of Pigs,

³⁸ Schudson, Michael. (1982). *The Power of News*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 135.

³⁹ Marshall, Jon. (2011). *Watergate's Legacy and the Press: The Investigative Impulse*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, p. 15.

the Berlin Wall, the assassination of a president, the Vietnam War, racial riots in big cities, college-campus riots, the assassination[s] of Senator Robert Kennedy and [Dr.] Martin Luther King [Jr.], the collapse of the promise of victory in Vietnam, long hair, sex and four-letter words in the open, drug addiction, Kent State, My Lai, a near depression, and Watergate” — this according to roughly half of a helpful sentence in *The Press and America*.⁴⁰

As regards Watergate, there’s a sense in which that serious injury to the body politic was blamed not on the Nixon administration, but on those who’d brought it to light. Among the period’s noted prosecutors of journalism was the late Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart; scholar Timothy E. Cook has cited a 1975 speech in which Stewart began by noting that Watergate coverage made many citizens “deeply disturbed by what they consider to be the illegitimate power of the organized press in the political structure of our society.”⁴¹ (“Illegitimate power” abounded in this era, apparently.)

In his published memoirs, Nixon himself — vis-a-vis his take on television coverage of the war in Vietnam — endeavored to describe the psychic toll that media coverage had taken on the public; at the same time, the former president implicitly lamented his administration’s inability to contextualize news in a way that might have helped to serve its agenda.

⁴⁰ Emery, Michael; Emery, Edwin; Roberts, Nancy L. (2000). *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*. Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon, p. 433.

⁴¹ Cook, Timothy E. (2005). Public Policy Toward the Press: What Government Does For the News Media. In *The Press*, Geneva Overholser, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 250.

“In each night’s TV news and each morning’s paper,” Nixon wrote, “the war was reported battle by battle, but little or no sense of the underlying purpose of the fighting was conveyed...More than ever before, television showed the terrible human suffering and sacrifice of war [and] the result was a serious demoralization of the home front, raising the question whether America would ever again be able to fight an enemy abroad with unity and strength and purpose at home.”⁴²

Before resigning the presidency in 1974, amid the near-certainty of impeachment, Nixon marshaled his administration to undo popular conceptions of journalism as noble and journalists as heroes. Reporters were characterized by Nixon’s White House not as public servants so much as powermongers — an absurdly hypocritical charge given the depth of malfeasance uncovered in the Watergate scandal. Vice President Spiro Agnew disparaged intellectuals who criticized American policy as “nattering nabobs of negativism,” while his White House colleagues illegally wiretapped journalists from the *New York Times*, CBS and elsewhere.⁴³ According to Nixon’s former speechwriter William Safire, the president made it plain: “The press is the enemy.”⁴⁴

There seems little doubt that the American public came to agree with Nixon’s designation insofar as the reputation of U.S. investigative reporting, like such reporting itself, deteriorated in the 1970s following its gallant appearance during

⁴² Nixon, Richard M. (1978). *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 159.

⁴³ Schudson, Michael; Tiftt, Susan E. (2005). American Journalism in Historical Perspective. In *The Press*, Geneva Overholser, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 22.

⁴⁴ “Safire, William. (2005). *Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House*. Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, p. 10.

and just after Watergate. The reassertion of journalists' need to remain objective helped characterize investigative reporting, with its adherence to advocacy principles and agenda setting, as irritating and irresponsible.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, daily newspaper editors began to heed surveys showing that readers wanted more information about entertainment, leisure, and daily living concerns, and less about politics and economics.⁴⁶

The growth of television news as a serious moneymaking proposition for the networks, along with the rise of *People* magazine and *USA Today*, proved the business assumption that brief stories and eye-catching graphics would entice post-Watergate and -Pentagon Papers readers. So, too, expanding corporations brought a predictably conservative influence to bear on journalism in the mid- to late-'70s.

In terms of making the connection between the mass media's response to events in the larger culture and its own making of culture — a vital connection in light of this work's interest in the product of one media organization, albeit small — Todd Gitlin's *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (1980) provides some instructions.

"Mass media define the public significance of movement events or, by blanking them out, actively deprive them of larger significance," Gitlin writes. "Yesterday's ignored or ridiculed kook becomes today's respected 'consumer activist,' while at the same time the mediated image of the wild sixties yields to the image of the laid-back, apathetic, self-satisfied seventies.

⁴⁵ Bennett, W. Lance; Serrin, William. (2005). The Watchdog Role. In *The Press*, Geneva Overholser, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 171.

⁴⁶ "Schudson, Tift, p. 32.

“Yesterday’s revolutionary John Froines of the Chicago Seven, who went to Washington in 1971 to shut down the government, goes to work for it in 1977 at a high salary; in 1977, Mark Rudd surfaces from the Weather Underground, and the sturdy meta-father Walter Cronkite chuckles approvingly as he reports that Mark’s father thinks the age of thirty is ‘too old to be a revolutionary’ -- these are widely publicized signs of presumably calmer, saner times. Meanwhile, movements... not led by ‘recognized leaders’...and which fall outside the prevailing frames...are routinely neglected or denigrated...”⁴⁷

Gitlin’s brief look at CBS’s groundbreaking television documentary *The Selling of the Pentagon* (1971) is valuable in terms of showing that a media organization’s rightward turn can come directly and ironically as a result of its success in speaking truth to power. “[The film] capitalized on a rising tide of antimilitarist sentiment, expressed CBS’s desire to declare independence from the military propaganda apparatus, and pointed the finger at a strictly limited, isolable sector of Pentagon operations,” Gitlin writes. “In a glare of First Amendment publicity, CBS stood fast against releasing outtakes to Congress, but subsequently failed to give the *Selling* producer, Peter Davis, new assignments, nor did it broadcast another documentary critical of the military until mid-1976, when the Vietnam war and the Nixon administration itself had ended.”

Another such example from Gitlin of mass media’s politically motivated shift in journalism practices dates from as early as 1969. “*TV Guide*,” Gitlin writes, “was announcing on September 27, 1969...that the networks were going to be

⁴⁷ Gitlin, Todd. (1980). *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. University of California Press: Berkeley. p. 13.

retrenching in their coverage of the Left, that they would be shifting toward 'exploring middle and lower-middle-class Americans. 'Middle America' and the 'silent majority' were the new shibboleths."⁴⁸

By the late '70s, this section of the American public, to whatever degree of consciousness, sought to shield its sorely needed strongmen from investigative inquiry; by the start of the '80s, the balance of power between the press and government had shifted toward the executive branch. ⁴⁹ Journalists' earlier challenge of traditional institutions and holders of power had indeed provoked a sharp reaction. "Conservatives were infuriated by what they saw as growing liberal bias in the media," writes Christopher B. Daly, "and they began to mobilize a counterattack that would play out in the following decades."⁵⁰

As regards that mobilized counterattack, one could say Sunn served in a special division entrusted to carry it out.

⁴⁸ Gitlin, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Marshall, p. 187.

⁵⁰ Daly, Christopher B. (2012). *Covering America: A Narrative History of a Nation's Journalism*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, p. 102.

3b. U.S. Politics and Religion of the 1970s

This section of the thesis will work to characterize U.S. politics and religion of the 1970s as having moved increasingly toward neo-conservatism as the decade progressed.

According to a Gallup poll, views of a secularizing nation peaked in 1969 and 1970, when 75 percent of Americans said faith was losing its clout in society. No doubt for some of these Americans, change needed to be made.⁵¹ (Another Gallup poll conducted in 1976 showed that only 5 percent of Americans had a “great deal” of trust and confidence in government’s ability to handle domestic problems; 42 percent had “not very much.”⁵²)

According to the Church of Latter-Day Saints’s statistical report for 2012, U.S. membership in the church grew from roughly 3 million members in 1970 to approximately 5 million in 1980 — more or less the period in which the Mormon-affiliated Sunn was spreading its message. (The church now claims roughly 15 million U.S. members.⁵³)

A backlash against the advances of progressive politics was afoot, not least among conservative Christians. In the “Mormonism and Women” chapter of *Mormonism: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Andrea G. Radke-Moss writes: “The 1970s brought greater fractures in the Church over the place of women, especially as the

⁵¹ Gallup poll. Retrieved on April 10, 2014 at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/162803/americans-say-religion-losing-influence.aspx>.

⁵² Gallup poll. Retrieved on April 10, 2014 at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/5392/trust-government.aspx>.

⁵³ Church of Latter-Day Saints poll. Retrieved on April 10, 2014 at <https://www.lds.org/youth/search/new/9?lang=eng&t=polls>.

Church's emphasis on traditional roles for women collided with the national women's movements' goals of bringing equality and greater access to women in education, athletics, politics, and the professions." The author cites the 1974 founding of *Exponent II* — a magazine designed "specifically to help Mormon women and men address their cultural, domestic, professional, and political challenges in the context of increasing feminist awareness."⁵⁴

To the extent that Mormons found "feminist awareness" to be a challenge to their ideals, the rampant misogyny of the Sunn films can be seen as the company's way of meeting that challenge head-on. Certainly the values expressed in Sunn's product are consistent with those of the '70s' anti-Equal Rights Amendment movement, which represented one of the conservative right's first victories in its bid to "take America back" to the glory days of Christian patriarchy.

Culminating in the 1980 amendment of the Republican Party platform to end its support of the ERA, the Stop ERA campaign was led by conservative Republican lawyer Phyllis Schlafly, who, defending traditional gender roles, would often open her speeches with lines such as, "I'd like to thank my husband for letting me be here tonight." While Schlafly and Stop ERA represented the public face of the anti-ERA movement, many ERA supporters blamed the defeat of their efforts on special interest forces, not least the National Council of Catholic Women. Donald T. Critchlow and Cynthia L. Stachecki write that the movement against the ERA, which religious conservatives of various sects had argued would guarantee abortion rights

⁵⁴ Radke-Moss, Andrea G. (2010). Mormonism and Women, in W. Paul Reeve, Ardis E. Parshall (eds.) *Mormonism: A Historical Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, p. 176.

and the right of same-sex couples to marry, was based on strong support among Southern whites, Evangelical Christians, Mormons, Orthodox Jews, and Roman Catholics of both genders.⁵⁵

As for who would represent the face of the New Right as a whole, Jimmy Carter, despite his strong Christian affiliations, wasn't going to cut it. In *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, Bruce J. Schulman describes Carter's ultimately unconvincing role as the embodiment of wishes for old-fashioned white male strength.

"Carter's modesty and wholesomeness spoke to a national yearning for simpler, quieter times," Schulman writes. "Even his lack of eloquence seemed reassuring; this straightforward, uninspiring man really would not lie to the American people. But well meaning as Carter was, he would not be able to pull the nation out of its developing malaise."⁵⁶

Indeed, someone other than Carter — someone with an iconic and old-fashioned personality, a figure of can-do authority — was needed to reassert American security and dominance in the wake of the crushing defeats of the early 1970s. In *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*, Jefferson Cowie writes, "[I]t perhaps should not be surprising that the nation [in electing Reagan] chose authority, calm, and order." The author quotes Andreas Killen on the miraculous nature of the country's collective mood swing, being that it followed the

⁵⁵ Critchlow, Donald T. and Cynthia L. Stachecki. "The Equal Rights Amendment Reconsidered: Politics, Policy, and Social Mobilization in a Democracy." *Journal of Policy History*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2008. p. 175.

⁵⁶ Schulman, p. 164.

“routinely evoked expressions of systemic, perhaps irreparable crisis” inspired by American society’s institutional failures.⁵⁷

“[T]he remarkable thing,” Killen writes, “was how quickly the nation reconstituted itself, and, moreover, did so along lines that reflected continuity with the deepest myths of the American past.”⁵⁸

In *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*, Wolfgang Schivelbusch explores the psychological and cultural responses of those in vanquished nations to the experience of military defeat — through looks at the South after the Civil War, France in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War, and Germany following World War I. The author contends that assertions of “cultural superiority” can manifest within the culture of defeat, a culture historically bent on the generation of glorious new myths by means of assuring psychological and cultural survival.⁵⁹

Released two years after the evacuation of U.S. military troops from Saigon, *Star Wars* (1977) can be seen to have supplied such a myth, as can Sunn’s *The Mysterious Monsters* (1975). Interestingly, in *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*, Tom Englehardt credits Ronald Reagan with achieving a “[George] Lucas-like reconstitution of the war story.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Cowie, Jefferson. (2010). *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. New York: The New Press, p. 19.

⁵⁸ Killen, Andreas. (2006). *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol and the Birth of Post-Sixties America*. New York: Bloomsbury, p. 53.

⁵⁹ Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. (2001). *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Englehardt, Tom. (1995). *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*. BasicBooks: New York. p. 270.

In 1977, *Star Wars* provided an explosively big win all around, but Reagan was still a dream and Carter the reality. Charting the particulars of America's self-image in the decades after World War II, Engelhardt delivers a strong sense of Carter's passively conservative acts and the resulting illness of the American public. "Facing what he termed a Vietnam-induced 'national malaise,'" Engelhardt writes, Carter "proposed briefly that Americans engage in 'the moral equivalent of war' by mobilizing and sacrificing on the home front to achieve energy independence from the OPEC oil cartel." Of the effects on Carter and the U.S. of the Iranian hostage crisis, Engelhardt asserts that Carter "was forced to live out his term against a televised backdrop of unending captivity and humiliation that seemed to highlight American impotence."⁶¹

By contrast, the Reagan victory in 1980 represents the culmination of mythic, postwar "cultural superiority." Addressed by Reagan to the National Association of Evangelicals, the "Evil Empire" speech of March 8, 1983, is a striking articulation of his administration's bid to deploy Christianity as a tool of strengthening one's sense of what Reagan called the "American experiment in democracy."

Reagan's words are worth quoting at length here: "So, I urge you to speak out against those who would place the United States in a position of military and moral inferiority. You know, I've always believed that old Screwtape reserved his best efforts for those of you in the Church. So, in your discussions of the nuclear freeze proposals, I urge you to beware the temptation of pride—the temptation of blithely...uh...declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault,

⁶¹ Engelhardt, p. 270.

to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil. I ask you to resist the attempts of those who would have you withhold your support for our efforts, this administration's efforts, to keep America strong and free, while we negotiate—real and verifiable reductions in the world's nuclear arsenals and one day, with God's help, their total elimination."⁶²

If "relief from troubling news," as I wrote above, is what the U.S. zeitgeist saw fit to dispense after 1973, Sunn, as we shall see in the section that follows, clearly filled the prescription. In terms of the evolution of American commercial cinema, including commercial documentary cinema, throughout the '70s, Sunn deserves recognition, contemptuous or otherwise, for its efforts in moving "investigation" a step closer to outlandish fiction — and making the results pointedly ideological to boot.

⁶² Reagan, Ronald. (1983). Speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, from *Raw History: The Presidential Speeches of Ronald Reagan (Vol. 1)*. CreateSpace: New York.

3c. U.S. Cinema of the 1970s

Before turning in the next section to a close look at seven Sunn pictures of the '70s, starting with the company's early narrative feature, *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams*, I will attempt to characterize U.S. cinema of the 1970s with the help, primarily, of four writers: Robin Wood; Peter Biskind; and Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner.

Among the challenges of researching U.S. documentary cinema of the '70s is that, aside from a dozen or so widely available titles, and roughly another dozen or two found only through intrepid sleuthing (and some degree of cost), the vast majority of these films are not in circulation on DVD, VHS, or 16mm (nor are they available for viewing online), and thus they are extremely difficult if not impossible for one to screen. (Having once driven more than 200 miles to borrow a battered 16mm copy of Jerry Bruck's 1973 film *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, I know the challenges first-hand. Perhaps this paper should take its title from that of radical documentarian Emile de Antonio's 1970 film, *America Is Hard to See*.)

Therefore, William Rothman's article "Looking Back and Turning Inward: American Documentary Films of the Seventies" (2000) is invaluable simply for acknowledging, in the course of a long essay, the titles, directors, and years of release of some 150 U.S. nonfiction films made and distributed between 1970 and 1980.

Grouped within well-defined sub-genres — including "Politics," "Folkloric Films," "Ethnographic Films," "Cinema verite's 'Old Masters,'" "Film Diaries," and

“Family Portrait Films,” with special sections devoted to Barbara Kopple’s *Harlan County, U.S.A.* and Craig Gilbert’s proto-reality TV epic *An American Family*, broadcast for 10 hours on PBS in 1973 (and now extremely scarce) — the films are more often mentioned by Rothman than described, and collectively do not quite represent the entirety of U.S. nonfiction cinema of the ‘70s.⁶³ But their inclusion in Rothman’s article allows for an understanding of the basic parameters of ‘70s documentary film — and, more important, their identification presents the researcher with a long list of titles to hunt (along with an open field of potential discovery and scholarship).

The Rothman article has other significant virtues, chief among them the author’s modestly contentious engagement with the scholarship of Richard M. Barsam, whose books — *Non-Fiction Film: Theory and Criticism* (1976) and *Non-Fiction Film: A Critical History* (revised and expanded in 1992) — represent the seminal works of U.S. documentary film studies. Invested in the analysis of ‘70s nonfiction cinema, Rothman challenges Barsam’s view that that this is a decade in which few filmmakers were interested “either in the identification of social abuses or in the cinematic experimentation that, a decade earlier, had created direct cinema.”⁶⁴

More incisively, Rothman deems “highly misleading” Barsam’s view that “most documentaries of the seventies opted for observing rather than confronting

⁶³ Rothman, William. (2000). Looking Back and Turning Inward: American Documentary Films of the Seventies, in David A. Cook (ed.) *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*, vol. 9 of *History of the American Cinema*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, p. 417.

⁶⁴ Barsam, Richard M. (1992). *Non-Fiction Film: A Critical History*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 349.

society and hence were *not* committed to principles of social justice, that they were on Nixon's side, as it were..."⁶⁵

In a passage worth quoting at length, Rothman writes: "Most documentary filmmakers in the seventies kept faith with their (generally leftist) political principles, but they were responding to a changed political situation [relative to that in the '60s]. The assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the election of Richard Nixon, the deaths of rock icons Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix, the withdrawal of Bob Dylan from the public stage (or, at least, from the role of prophet), and the killing at Altamont [documented in *Gimme Shelter*]...all meant that the sixties were over. The political protests of the sixties were history, and by the mid-'70s the Vietnam War and the Nixon presidency had become history, too."⁶⁶

In other words, there wasn't much left for the Left to fight, and not much to celebrate, either; the Me Decade, through means economic, cultural, and political, nudged leftist documentarians away from the fiercely critical positions they had taken in the recent past.

The limitations of the film studies literature evaluated in this thesis thus far include its predominantly narrow focus on films and filmmakers. The needs of the thesis to address larger historical issues related to the sociopolitical climate of the U.S. as it evolved throughout the '70s and led to Reagan's election as president encourage me to turn to a trio of methodologically and stylistically diverse sources: Robin Wood's *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986); Peter Biskind's *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock 'N' Roll Generation Saved*

⁶⁵ Rothman, p. 418.

⁶⁶ Rothman, p. 433.

Hollywood (1998); and, particularly, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner's *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (1988).

For the purposes of this thesis, what these three books lack in discussion of documentary film, they make up for in terms of their variously researched characterization of the tug of war that defined American culture and politics throughout the 1970s.

Wood's book, deftly straddling the line between popular criticism and scholarly investigation, endeavors, as the author puts it, to "grasp, in all its complexity, a decisive 'moment,' an ideological shift, in Hollywood cinema and (by implication) in American culture...I have become increasingly aware of the importance of seeing works in the context of their culture, as living ideological entities, rather than as sanctified exhibits floating in the void of an invisible museum."⁶⁷

Grounded in Marxist and Freudian theory, Wood's work identifies the "major eruptions in American culture from the mid-60s and into the 70s: overwhelmingly, of course, Vietnam, but subsequently Watergate, and part counterpoint, part consequence, the growing force and cogency of radical protest and liberation movements — black militancy, feminism, gay liberation."⁶⁸

These "eruptions" can be seen to have given rise to the confrontational films that constitute the documentary form's strongest achievements of the early '70s, a period in which, as Wood writes, "[t]he obvious monstrousness of the war

⁶⁷ Wood, Robin. (1986). *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 21.

⁶⁸ Wood, p. 12.

definitively undermined the credibility of ‘the system’ — the system that had hitherto retained sufficiently daunting authority and impressiveness to withstand the theoretical onslaughts of Marx and Freud, the province only of dubious intellectuals...The questioning of authority spread logically to a questioning of the entire social structure that validated it...”⁶⁹

On the other hand, supporting evidence of the U.S. documentary’s retreat from confrontation can be found in Wood’s eighth chapter, “Papering the Cracks: Fantasy and Ideology in the Reagan Era.” Although Wood here focuses on the blockbusting, white male hero-affirming narrative films of Steven Spielberg (1975’s *Jaws*) and George Lucas (1977’s *Star Wars*) that triumphantly emerged after half a decade of bleak and critical Hollywood movies such as *M*A*S*H*, *Chinatown* and *Night Moves*, the context for his criticism is an administration — that of president Jimmy Carter — “promising,” as Wood writes, “the sense of a decent and reassuring liberalism, [making] possible a huge ideological sigh of relief in preparation for an era of recuperation and reaction.”⁷⁰ This context is useful toward situating documentary cinema’s own late-‘70s “blockbusters” — *In Search of Noah’s Ark*, *In Search of Historic Jesus*, and other such nonfiction films “papering the cracks” — within a period of, in Wood’s words, “recuperation and reaction.”

Wood’s work is important for capturing textual evidence of a “decisive ‘moment,’ an ideological shift, in Hollywood cinema and (by implication) in American culture.” Through his analysis of Hollywood films including those of

⁶⁹ Wood, p. 9.

⁷⁰ Wood, p. 31.

Spielberg and Lucas, he finds a popular cinema that, like a Sunn film, seeks to “paper the cracks.”

Compared with Wood’s, Biskind’s book puts far greater emphasis on a pop-journalistic aesthetic of investigation, gossiping as it does about the debauched personal lives of ‘70s Hollywood directors whose films, by and large, turned from countercultural to conservative. But Biskind’s research into ‘70s filmmaking is exhaustive and enriched by a Wood-like backdrop of sociopolitically turning tides. In addition, the author devotes a small number of pages to the ‘70s struggles of leftist film producer Bert Schneider, whose *Hearts and Minds* (1974) — a searing critique of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, directed by Peter Davis — controversially won the Oscar for Best Documentary and, Biskind asserts, cost Schneider his career.

Biskind: “When [Schneider] walked up to the podium to accept [the Oscar], resplendent in an immaculate white tux, he stunned the glittering array of celebrities and millions of TV viewers by conveying ‘greetings of friendship to all American people’ from [Vietnam’s U.N.] Ambassador Dinh Ba Thi, chief of the Provisional Revolutionary Government delegation to the Paris peace talks. There was a moment of shocked silence, then a burst of applause, punctuated by scattered hisses.”⁷¹ (Biskind’s devotion to this particular story — falling, as it does, somewhat outside his book’s purview — may well stem from his own work directing another early ‘70s documentary expose, *On the Battlefield*.)

⁷¹ Biskind, Peter. (1998). *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*. New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 223.

Biskind's book is written in a highly populist (and entertaining) vein, but, like Wood's work (if more investigative in journalistic terms), it shows that the culture of the late-'70s proved inhospitable to movies that spoke truth to power and rewarding of upbeat assertions of a reinvigorated white male American authority.

The volume perhaps most essential to the background of this thesis is *Camera Politica*, whose comprehensive critical analysis of U.S. narrative cinema in the '70s and early '80s is informed by the authors' equally thorough collection of audience surveys and printed archival material (covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* are strikingly illustrative) with which to characterize the mood of the nation during a period of great change. Beginning with quotes from Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Adrienne Rich, and Cornel West, the book, as the authors write, "focuses on the relationship between Hollywood film and American society from 1967 to the mid-eighties, a period characterized by a major swing in dominant social movements from Left to Right."⁷²

The survey detailed in the book's appendix was conducted in the Boston, New York, and Chicago areas and entailed 22 in-depth oral interviews with people of varying races, sexes, and classes, and 153 questionnaires. The questions range from those about the messages of high-grossing '70s films such as *Dirty Harry* (1971), *The Towering Inferno* (1974), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), and *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) to those about the economic system of the United States, including its distribution of wealth.

⁷² Kellner, Ryan, p. 15.

The authors' research and critical insights in chapters such as "Crisis Films" and "The Return of the Hero: Entrepreneur, Patriarch, Warrior," among others, though they're derived from narrative cinema, are readily applicable to '70s nonfiction film. Indeed, the title of the book's central chapter, "Genre Transformations and the Failure of Liberalism," speaks volumes about the progression of documentary film throughout the '70s.

Ryan and Kellner: "While [Jimmy] Carter was blaming Americans morally for the country's economic dilemmas, the people were demonstrating, through the appeal of certain films around 1978, that they wanted a more positive sense of the future, a more affirmative political vision... If these latter events prefigure the resurgence of conservatism in American political life, the mid-seventies films can be read as cinematic articulations of the failure of liberalism that would pave the way for that resurgence."⁷³

Camera Politica is valuable to this thesis in cine-political terms for suggesting that the achievement of reactionary producers such as those at Sunn was to counter the narrative films of the late-'60s' and early '70s' "New Hollywood" movement — films that, according to Ryan and Kellner, "exercised the same transgressive tendencies that were breaking down old principles of order in the world of the radical movements and the counterculture. [These films] questioned the sanctity of the white male hero, the iconography of capitalist individualism, the ideal of

⁷³ " Kellner, Ryan, p. 237.

conservative family life (so powerfully promulgated in fifties television), the prevailing ethos of sexual repression, and so on."⁷⁴

Calling Grizzly Adams to the rescue.

⁷⁴ " Kellner, Ryan, p. 221.

Chapter 4: The Facts Are These

4a. Hints of the New Morning: Sunn's 1974 Shine on Grizzly Adams

To recap what we have established in the previous section: U.S. journalism of the '70s moved gradually from muckraking to mush; politics and religion of the period evince a growing conservatism, spiked with a certain retaliatory energy; and the decade's cinema, not unlike its journalism, comes to gravitate away from speaking truth to power and toward a frivolous celebration of variously invented victories with which to soothe an ailing nation.

This section of the thesis examines Sunn's activity in 1974. A quick scan of the chief box-office hits of that year verifies that these financially successful American films are many of the ones we memorably associate with the 1970s: Francis Ford Coppola's magisterial Mob epic *The Godfather Part II*; two splendidly raunchy Mel Brooks comedies, *Blazing Saddles* and *Young Frankenstein*; white male order-restoring disaster films *The Towering Inferno*, *Airport 1975* and *Earthquake*; a lesser James Bond movie, *The Man With the Golden Gun*; Robert Aldrich's rough-and-tumble comedy *The Longest Yard*; classy, spendy studio attractions *The Great Gatsby* and *Murder on the Orient Express*; for the kids, *Benji* (anthropomorphic dog) and *Herbie Rides Again* (anthropomorphic car); and grungy exploitation pics ranging in budget from indie maverick Tobe Hooper's barebones *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and the lean and mean *The Trial of Billy Jack* to motor-crazed *Dirty Mary*

Crazy Larry and Paramount's big-budget, pro-vigilante *Death Wish* with Charles Bronson.⁷⁵

Classics all — of one sort or another. Indeed, only one of those among the top 10 commercially successful movies of '74 raises an eyebrow for its relatively unknown status and, its anthropomorphic bear cub sidekick notwithstanding, a certain resistance to classification: *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams*. Billed as the “true story of a man exiled in the wilderness and how he learns to survive”⁷⁶ by fledgling production and distribution company Sunn Classic Pictures, the film — set in 1853, shot mostly in Canada (and in widescreen) and running for what feels like a full workday — is now largely forgotten. Still, there's some evidence of a cult: VHS tapes of the movie go for as much as \$200 on Amazon; several uploaded digital “rips” of the tape edition circulate on YouTube; and none other online arbiter of film taste than *Stacy's Guide to Animal Movies* calls the picture, “A goodie for members of The 70s Preservation Society only :).”⁷⁷

Reviews of the time were considerably less kind than Stacy's. In an early edition of his encyclopedic *Movie Guide* (then called *TV Movies*), Leonard Maltin called *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams* a “poorly made, clumsily scripted family/wilderness saga, about [a] fur trapper innocently pursued for [a] crime, who finds peace in the mountains where he befriends a massive bear.”⁷⁸ *TV Guide's* critic

⁷⁵ List taken from WorldwideBoxoffice.com. Retrieved March 28, 2014.

⁷⁶ Quote taken from Sunn Classic Pictures' original theatrical poster for *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams*, 1974.

⁷⁷ Quote taken from *Stacy's Guide to Animal Movies*. Retrieved on March 28, 2014 at StacyWilson.com.

⁷⁸ Maltin, Leonard, ed. (2013). *2014 Movie Guide*. Penguin Group: New York, p. 154.

was even less impressed: “The story is banal and completely lacking in credibility. The filmmaking matches [the story in quality], with long, silent passages that feature an unnecessary narration by [actor Dan] Haggerty telling exactly what’s taking place on the screen. Sunn Classic knew exactly what it was doing with this...filmmaking at its most basic commodity level...”⁷⁹

In fact, to say that Sunn “knew exactly what it was doing” with its “basic commodity” is an understatement. Speaking to *TV Guide* in 1978, Sellier, who wrote the 1972 novel on which the film is based, described his pre-production use of extensive market testing (a scheme that Sunn would continue throughout the ‘70s), which ended up showing that, to some degree or another, audiences liked “stories about men and animals in the wilderness.”⁸⁰

The absence of women in that equation is key — to Sunn’s success, one could argue (particularly given that much of the company’s subsequent work is misogynistic), and to the nature of the company’s audience at a time, one year after *Roe v. Wade*, when a backlash against advances made by the Women’s Liberation Movement was beginning to gather steam.

Interestingly, the first scene of *Grizzly Adams* has the titular trapper and woodsman (played by Haggerty) up ‘n’ leaving his eight-year-old daughter Peg for parts unknown and an indefinite amount of time. The stated reason — literally stated in cloying voiceover — is that Grizzly is seeking refuge in the mountains, having been wrongly accused of murder. In any case, he looks damn delighted to be

⁷⁹ Quote taken from TVGuide.com. Retrieved March 28, 2014.

⁸⁰ Chimpson, Janice C. (1978, June 6). Studio Cleans Up By Marketing Films Like Selling Soap. *TV Guide*, p. 22.

exercising his manly right to cut himself loose of burdensome accountability — and, as a budding neo-conservative audience member might say, *Why shouldn't he?*

Cinematically speaking, much of the film is low-res nature porn. Inspiring, if that's the word, later man-meets-nature hits such as *The Adventures of the Wilderness Family* and *Challenge to Be Free* (both 1975), *Grizzly Adams* is lousy with sub-documentary shots of sky, sun, mountains, birds, flowers, and various friendly critters getting what look like full-body rubdowns from our shaggy hero, who's more Jesus than Dr. Doolittle even though the animals make the man. More on the basis of his intimate rapport with God's creations than of his ludicrously self-satisfied befriending of a wounded American Indian named Nakoma (thanklessly played by Don Shanks), Grizzly starts wondering aloud — always aloud — whether he's "special." Indeed, not a few other white men wondered whether they were heroes in the painful period between Watergate and the resignation of Richard M. Nixon, between *Last Tango in Paris* and *Charlie's Angels*.

Speaking of sex, Grizzly is surely one of the most asexual protagonists ever to grace a feature film (the mother of his daughter, for example, remains conspicuously unmentioned), although he does bond somewhat intimately with the one he calls a "crow brave." ("Our friendship grew," Grizzly tells the viewer. "I lost all sense of time passing. Everything just hung there so still and quiet.") Still, homoeroticism is entirely out of the question here given Sunn's back-to-old-values project, and, if anything, the particulars of the friendship between these two "blood brothers" suggest that the white man (if not the director and his audience) sees their relationship less as a mutually beneficial bond than as a competition. At the start of

a would-be playful wrestling match between the two, Grizzly makes it known that he can beat the Indian, but he humiliates himself trying and eventually resorts to fighting dirty in order to get Nakoma on the ground once. At another point, Grizzly doubts Nakoma's handcrafted snare for small game — just before getting caught in it himself. (Hints of American military foibles in the Vietnam War here?)

Suffice it to say that *Grizzly Adams* hardly counts as restitution payment to American Indians. A year after the Wounded Knee incident in which 200 Oglala Lakota and followers of the American Indian Movement (AIM) seized and occupied the town of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, Nakoma appears only too happy to keep a watchful eye on Grizzly and Ben from his perch high in the mountains, at one point saving the trapper from a black bear attack. Understandably to the target audience, Grizzly can't get used to the Indian's favored cuisine of grass and weed stew in a scene seemingly designed to characterize the white man as noble (for at least trying his friend's apparently awful food) and the non-white man as savage (or at least without good taste).

Back to being a lone wolf amid Nakoma's evident duties as mountaintop lookout, Grizzly drives himself even further into the wilderness — building a raft, heading down whitewater rapids and vowing to “never come back” — and yet he still manages to receive a special visitor: his daughter Peg, now a grown schoolteacher (though she still calls our hero “Daddy” and apologizes to him for daring to go out for a walk alone). Subserviently, she tells him some important information: first, that the authorities found the murderer, so Grizzly is off the hook and able to come home; and, second, that he has become famous throughout the

territory for being the “man who tamed the grizzly bear.” She has come to bring him back to their old homestead, but, acting like John Wayne in *The Searchers* (while anticipating the fantasy-loving deadbeat dad of Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*), he won’t go. “I just can’t change now, I can’t come back with you,” Grizzly says, somberly but with determination. “The mountains — it’s where I belong.” Over shots of the sun-dappled prairie, a syrupy pop song more than modeled on John Denver’s 1971 hit “Take Me Home, Country Roads” urges, “Take me home/Take me home/Take me home/Take me home.” But, of course, our rugged outdoorsman is already there.

“Slowly I began to understand that I was going to be a part of [nature],” Grizzly confesses in voiceover. “The wilderness I’d been so afraid of...wasn’t a dangerous place.” Give or take the environmental movement of the early ‘70s, *Grizzly Adams*’s most healthy influence seems to be the work of nature writers Rachel Carson (1962’s *Silent Spring*) and Edward Abbey (1968’s *Desert Solitaire*). More politically intriguing, though, is the film’s total avoidance of the slightest details regarding the crime for which Grizzly is accused. In ‘74, Grizzly evinces the American white man’s desire to escape from law and order (one that Reagan’s small-g government would grant soon enough).

As roughly half of *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams* is given over to scenes of animal hijinks (that on-set trainer is a wizard indeed), one may watch the film and wonder, *Why on earth is this excruciating, interminable pap worth remembering?* Simply put, the film earned an estimated \$45 million on a budget of roughly \$250,000, making it one of the most profitable features ever released, not to

mention a film seen by almost as many Americans as *The Godfather Part II* (which grossed \$57 million).⁸¹ A 1976 telecast of the film by NBC captured an astonishing 43 percent market share.⁸²

Of final importance is the fact that *Grizzly Adams* represents Sunn Classic Pictures' prescient vision of what Ronald Reagan would call a "new morning in America" — a blazing ray of hope for the '80s, or so it was billed and widely interpreted.

As stated earlier, *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams* is now largely forgotten, although individual reviews found on Amazon.com seem telling of the film's influence in inspirational terms among the film's most, uh, faithful audience.

In 2013, "KD" called it "so peaceful and beautiful to watch." In 2006, "Bluemountainbob" reported he had "honestly forgotten just how good this movie was. I had last seen this movie when it was first released in 1974, and I was the young and tender age of nine!... I had forgotten the simple-but-wonderful storyline. The way that you can almost 'feel' the wonder of the mountains through each of the characters (I always did love Ben) and the very relaxing acoustic music score... To Hollywood I ask, 'Why can't you make more movies like this?'"

Writing in 2013, "AaronCapenBanner" offered the site's most politically evocative take on the film's appeal. "They do not make films like this anymore, sadly, since [*Grizzly Adams*] presents such a thoughtful and gentle view of living in harmony in the wild with animals that it no doubt is called 'corny' by modern cynics

⁸¹ Taken from WorldwideBoxoffice.com. Retrieved March 28, 2014.

⁸² Statistic taken from Wikipedia. Retrieved March 28, 2014.

that are far too jaded by our coarse modern culture.”⁸³

After *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams* had finished making its fortune, Sunn squeezed even more honey out of ol’ Ben and Grizzly in the form of a two-season TV spinoff series for NBC and a 1982 TV movie. Still, not all things Grizzly were tame as Sunn met Hollywood. Early in 1979, *The Deseret News* reported an epic court fight around the issue of Grizzly rights: “At least six attorneys and almost an equal number of film producers continue to paw at their claims to the millions of dollars grossed to date from the Grizzly showings at theaters and on television.”⁸⁴

At issue, according to the *Deseret’s* Joseph T. Liddell: “Besides determining who should get the profits, the trial must decide also who should have played the lead of Grizzly Adams; whose bear(s) and numerous other animals should have been cast in the filmings; whose photoplay should have been used for the productions; whose script and screenplay were adapted for the filmings or whose were plagiarized; and who breached their contract(s).”

In the end (and who could blame him after reporting all that?), Utah-based Liddell couldn’t help dipping his paw in the waters of film criticism. “The jury, judge and litigants [in one trial] viewed three hours worth of awesome color film footage the first week.”

More struggle greeted Grizzly in the ‘80s, with the headline, “Did Dan ‘Grizzly Adams’ Haggerty Lose His Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame Because of a Drug Bust?” Turns out, following the text past its 100-point headline, Haggerty’s wild days

⁸³ Quotes taken from Amazon.com. Retrieved March 28, 2014.

⁸⁴ Liddell, Joseph T. (1979, Jan. 16). *The Deseret News*. Grizzly tame compared to court fight. p. 1

are merely “urban legend.”⁸⁵ The story follows: In ’84, Haggerty was convicted of possessing something that Ben should never, ever toot up those cute nostrils of his; but it didn’t much matter in that the Hollywood star that was allegedly taken away from him was never his to begin with, only the result of unfortunate misspelling that credited Haggerty with the accomplishments of Don Haggerty, no doubt one helluva fine actor in the likes of Don Siegel’s *The Killers* and *Dirty Harry*, but unsuitable for further discussion in this article. (The so-called real Grizzly Adams — John Capen Adams, a.k.a. John “Grizzly Adams” (1812-1860) — is potentially researchable as well, but not here.)

For his part, Sellier went on from *Grizzly Adams* to preside over the swift rise and fall of Sunn before making a film that no one could have expected from the Mormon who made *In Search of Historic Jesus*. In 1984, Sellier produced and directed the notorious *Silent Night, Deadly Night*, an otherwise routine slasher movie except that the killer in this case menaces kids in a Santa suit. (Slay bells, indeed.)

The brightest sign for what’s left of Sellier and Sunn is the sale of Grizzly merchandise — hats, T-shirts, the works — by Sellier’s now-remarried widow (at grizzlyadams.com). Just before Sellier’s death, ChristianNewsWire.com reported that Grizzly Adams Productions “has placed a total of 600 television commercials on 18 U.S. cable networks for the month of November. The 60-second spots will raise awareness of the individual titles and promote direct response sales for ten of the company’s productions including *Friends for Life*, its recently released, award-

⁸⁵ Quotes taken from <http://legendsrevealed.com>. Retrieved March 28, 2014.

winning feature film.”⁸⁶

Talking to ChristianNewsWire.com, Sellier, engaged in what would be his final business venture, offered a familiar line: “Each television special, docudrama, and feature film we produce is exhaustively researched.”⁸⁷

In each of the next three sections of the thesis, I will analyze a pair of Sunn films that, grouped together, serve to illustrate one of the company’s approaches to nonfiction tropes and/or one of its particular sub-genres (e.g., the supernatural pseudo-doc, the Biblical pseudo-doc, and, finally, the deathbed melodrama).

4b. Psychic Evidence and Documentary Droppings: Sunn’s Supernatural Pseudo-Docs (1975-1976)

“A great deal can be learned from droppings,” a scientist (or “scientist”) proclaims near the midpoint of *The Mysterious Monsters*, the line being one I plan to use whenever called to defend my scholarly interest in Sunn.

Wantonly anti-intellectual, peppered with staged “documentary” footage of the titular creatures, *The Mysterious Monsters* has on-camera host Peter Graves authoritatively holding forth on the existence of Bigfoot and other dubious creatures — or at least the strong possibility of their existence – while sifting through ludicrous pieces of “evidence” with the eventual help of a “psychic detective.” Made a year later, *The Amazing World of Psychic Phenomena* takes “proof” of the supernatural a step further, arguing “we all have telepathic powers.” Whatever their

⁸⁶ Quotes taken from ChristianNewsWire.com. Retrieved March 28, 2014.

⁸⁷ Taken from ChristianNewsWire.com. Retrieved on April 10, 2014.

intentions, these two films are ultimately most persuasive of Sunn's investment in promoting the "unknown" while denigrating scientific research, documentary filmmaking integrity, and females of any species.

Opening with a dramatic display of the company's stop motion-animated logo, the sun's cut-out flames recalling a kindergarten play prop and the fanfare sounding warbled enough to resemble a slightly disco-inflected dirge, *Monsters* then cuts to the image of a white-haired, distinguished-looking Graves addressing the camera. "The facts that will be presented," he says soberly, "are true. This may be the most startling film you will ever see."⁸⁸

From there, interstitial wilderness shots suggest not Sunn's adherence to an expository trope of documentary so much as a nod to the target audience's desire for a vacation from Hollywood and TV-news images of urban blight. (That desire could have been either intuited by Sunn's filmmakers or flat-out known as a result of the company's surveys.) Amid the comfort of nature, the viewer is suddenly alerted to the presence of what looks to be an extremely tall man in a faux-fur body suit trudging purposefully through thick brush.

While it's not entirely clear how Sunn obtained this shakycam footage, subsequent tracking shots taken from Bigfoot's point of view beg the question of whether Graves may have wanted to mention in his authoritative intro that some of the "facts," "startling" and "true," would need to be staged.

⁸⁸ Guenette, Robert. *The Mysterious Monsters*. VHS. Directed by Guenette. Salt Lake City: Sunn Classic Pictures, 1975.

In another of the film's reenactments (more accurately described as narrative sequences based on purported accounts), a white male hero brusquely shoves aside a woman in the course of grabbing a gun to "deal" with an intruding Bigfoot. Equally revealing of Sunn's gender politics is a sequence involving an outdoor expedition made by three middle-aged male buddies, one of whom hears a low-fi growl that he says "sounds like my mother-in-law."⁸⁹

Sunn's documentary-deseccrating act of unacknowledged dramatic staging aside, the film does appear plainspoken and straightforward in its disdain for real investigation as practiced by those whom Graves gruffly and repeatedly labels as "proof"-rejecting "scientists and skeptics."⁹⁰ By Sunn's apparent definition, valid journalistic tools include hypnosis, administered to an alleged psychological victim of Bigfoot near the film's climax, and the "analysis" of a so-called psychic detective who scrunches his eyebrows while staring intently at a sealed suitcase, eventually determining the contents to be hairy and definitely Bigfoot-related.

But what can Bigfoot himself be said to signify within the film's ideological matrix? Graves notes late in the movie that Bigfoot performed "certain patriarchal duties" for his family while under observation by the movie's appointed researchers. But one "Mrs. Jefferson" interviewed here says she found Bigfoot "smelly" during her brief encounter with him, so there's also the possibility that the filmmakers may mean to invoke the viewer's dread of '70s America's last remaining hippie.

What complicates one's discursive transcoding of *The Mysterious Monsters* is the film's parting message, which amounts to an awkwardly articulated but

⁸⁹ Guenette, *Monsters*.

⁹⁰ Guenette, *Monsters*.

nevertheless clear endorsement of a sort of pacifist environmentalism — mixed, that is, with an ode to the male animal’s rugged individual freedoms, including his right to hate “skeptics.”

Over sun-dappled shots of Bigfoot leisurely traversing God’s green earth, a ‘50s Hollywood-style violin score setting a gently upbeat and nostalgic mood, Graves reports: “Bigfoot is today free to roam the forests of America, living off the land but leaving no trace of his passage except for an occasional footprint. He’s gigantic and powerful, and yet he harms nobody and destroys nothing. He is at peace with the wilderness.”⁹¹

A dramatic cut is made to a shot of Graves addressing the camera for the final time. “But this wilderness is vanishing,” he says. “Each year the press of civilization converts our forests into towns, our meadows into roads. The land that Bigfoot lives on shrinks. Soon [Bigfoot and others like him] may be driven from their wilderness cover, like Ishi, the dawn man of Redding, California. And we will at last know what they are. And then there will be no more skeptics.”⁹² Over images of treetops swaying in the breeze, the music soars.

Made near the start of the company’s six-year run, *The Mysterious Monsters* appears the paradigmatic Sunn film, introducing a problem — in this case, the problem of “scientists and skeptics” not believing in things that those with faith readily accept — and then resolving that problem over the course of 90-odd minutes, in part by asserting the dominance of conservative white males in matters both domestic and outdoorsy, real and supernatural, and through the statement of

⁹¹ Guenette, *Monsters*.

⁹² Guenette, *Monsters*.

facts, “facts,” and more “facts,” as per the tenets of the Church of Latter Day Saints, in which facts (or “facts”) are essential.

The Sunn films, in other words, are documentaries (or mock-documentaries) in which the viewer is asked not to weigh concrete evidence so much as to take a leap of faith — if only to arrive at the soothed sense that true believers will be able to maintain what’s...well, true.

Made and released in 1976, *The Amazing World of Psychic Phenomena* appears at once more strenuously conservative and more spacey and cultish than its predecessor. The designated authority figure this time is former TV-drama investigator Raymond Burr, who, at the end of a film bent on asserting the virtues of spirituality over those of science, concludes, unforgettably, “We are energy. And we are forever.”⁹³

After a mere 18 minutes of nonsensical inquiry into the subject of psychic phenomena, Burr is satisfied enough to claim, “We have proven, partly at least, that we all have telepathic powers.” Citing Nostradamus, he offers, “There are faculties that we have never understood as scientists.”⁹⁴

Rivalling *The Mysterious Monsters* in its number of anti-intellectual jibes while leaning even more heavily on reenactments, *The Amazing World of Psychic Phenomena* comes to suggest not a pseudo-documentary so much as a compendium of short, soap opera-style narrative vignettes, several of which crudely dramatize white male anxiety around issues of power and control. (In this, *Psychic Phenomena*

⁹³ Guenette, Robert. *The Amazing World of Psychic Phenomena*. VHS. Directed by Guenette. Salt Lake City: Sunn Classic Pictures, 1976.

⁹⁴ Guenette, *Psychic Phenomena*.

anticipates Sunn's eventual discarding of nonfiction tropes altogether, a move described in the final section of this chapter.)

One scene in *Psychic Phenomena* has "Mr. and Mrs. Mike Rogers" of small-town Florida dealing with the latter's "psychokinetic powers," whereby living room objects appear to tip over by themselves, causing a kind of domestic disturbance that must be put straight. Wives with "psychokinetic" powers, such as the hysterically weepy Mrs. Mike Rogers, "act out their hostilities toward their husbands," Burr observes as the pathetic missus and her powerless hubby are shown sitting uncomfortably on the couch.

A clock, which suddenly chimes as if to punctuate the urgency of the matter, appears directly between the two marrieds, as the film goes on to suggest that the future will surely bring an end to such disruptive behavior.

Ryan and Kellner, though specifically addressing *The Exorcist* and other Hollywood "crisis films" of the '70s, could well be deconstructing *Psychic Phenomena* when they write, "Generally [the metaphors of catastrophe in crisis films] concern changes brought about by the movements of the sixties, feminism particularly. They also concern the threat to social authority and male paternalist power which the rebelliousness of sixties youth represented.

"Natural disaster in early seventies films is often a metaphor for the 'immorality' and 'disorders' of the late sixties, or for the 'democratic distemper' which conservatives saw at work during the period. In crisis films, a stern paternalist male order is reimposed on such troubles."⁹⁵

⁹⁵ " Kellner, Ryan, p. 238.

In *Psychic Phenomena*, Burr seems to answer such a call for order when, the sound of the relieved and reinvigorated in his voice, he reports that Mrs. Rogers eventually “came to understand what was happening to her, resolved her problems with her husband, and today lives in a quiet, normal household.”⁹⁶

For Sunn viewers of the time, the amazing world lay near.

4c. Last Temptations: Sunn’s Biblical Pseudo-Docs (1976, 1979)

Sunn’s pair of overtly religious films — *In Search of Noah’s Ark* (1976) and *In Search of Historic Jesus* (1979) — represents the company’s most financially successful work as well as evidence of what Tom Wolfe’s 1976 “Me Decade” essay had identified as the “third great religious wave in American history.”⁹⁷

Given that the two films fall very much within the same subgenre (call it the late-’70s Christian neo-con pseudo-doc, if you like), the similarities and differences between them — including, significantly, the dates of their production — appear valuably illustrative of the Sunn pictures’ artistic and ideological evolution throughout the decade.

In Search of Noah’s Ark appears as the reactionary response of ’70s conservative Christians who, as Cowie writes, “felt that their country was being

⁹⁶ ” Kellner, Ryan, p. 237.

⁹⁷ Wolfe, Tom. (1976, August 23). The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening. *New York*, p. 34.

taken from them, their children were being turned against them, the Bible was being mocked, the moral foundation of their world was being undermined.”⁹⁸

Hucksterish in the extreme, the opening minutes of *Noah's Ark* find bearded, middle-aged, toupee-sporting host Brad Crandall, who looks like he just came off a used car lot at quitting time, promising viewers they'll soon be witness to a string of vital investigations.

Crandall: “[W]e will examine the historical accuracy of the Bible. We will experience the story of Noah. We will investigate the possibilities of a worldwide flood. We will relive the many adventures of the expeditions that have scaled Mount Ararat, looking for the ark. And we will take part in a number of startling new discoveries.

“This may be the most incredible film you will ever see. But the facts that will be presented are true.”⁹⁹

The palpable vigor of Crandall's voice here suggests the eagerness and puffed-up authority with which Sunn delivered its designations of the *really* important news of the day. Sunn is all but standing at the pulpit in moments such as this, proud to make muckraking look trivial and/or juvenile compared with its epic “search.”

The narrative depictions of white-haired Noah in Sunn's film characterize him as a gentle friend of animals and, as Crandall says in voiceover, a “just man who walked with God” and shared the Almighty's disgust with human “corruption and

⁹⁸ Cowie, p. 166.

⁹⁹ Conway, Sellier. *Noah's Ark*.

violence.”¹⁰⁰

“Watch out, you sinners,” this ode to selective repopulation seems to tell its ‘70s audience. “It’s a hard rain’s a-gonna fall.” (Speaking of Bob Dylan, I’d be remiss not to mention that even he found Jesus by decade’s end.)

Reviews of the film were invariably unappreciative — and suit-followingly shallow. “The narrow purposes of the filmmakers virtually destroy the movie’s credibility,” declared Van Nuys’s *Valley News* of *Noah’s Ark* in ‘77, the review being typical of the quick wit and scant sociocultural inquiry with which reviewers sought to block out the Sunn. “They [at Sunn] yank and stretch every fact, fable and archaeology test they can lay hands on simply to prove the literal truth of the Noah story — and by extension everything else in the Bible.”¹⁰¹ The review is faintly amusing, but Sunn, with its extraordinary box-office receipts, clearly had the last laugh.

Sunn’s other overtly religious picture, *In Search of Historic Jesus*, is likewise narrated by Crandall, although it jumps straight from the Sunn logo to the reenactments and returns to them often, as if in acknowledgement that journalism, even pseudo-journalism, requires work.

Crandall, once again cheering the winning team in his first appearance in the film: “Over the centuries, Christianity has grown from a handful of disciples to one of the world’s major religious forces. Today, one-fourth of the world’s population — over one billion people — believe [sic] that Jesus is the son of God. Still, there are

¹⁰⁰ Conway, Sellier. *Noah’s Ark*.

¹⁰¹ Valley News. (1977, January 21). In Search of Noah’s Ark. Retrieved January 10, 2014 from <http://www.newspapers.com/newspage/30337393/>.

those who insist he never existed, that he was a myth. And others who say he was a teacher or prophet, but not the son of God.

“Doubts like these have been expressed for centuries. But today, new questions have captured the imagination of millions of ordinary people, as well as scholars and scientists.”¹⁰²

On balance, *Historic Jesus* appears more preachy and less demonstrative of its research than *Noah's Ark*, which is understandable given the subject matter. But other late-period Sunn works, including the all-narrative *Beyond Death's Door* (see below), likewise suggest that the once-“investigative” Sunn filmmakers had taken an increasing amount of refuge within age-old, comfortably familiar narratives — in effect swallowing the same medicine that its own texts had prescribed to the audience.

4d. Toward the Light: Sunn's Deathbed Melodramas (1978-1979)

If the Sunn pseudo-docs can be considered on some level as works of journalism (at least insofar as they deign to research and report, if not without a transparent agenda), their closest equivalents in print are modern tabloid newspapers, wherein the lowest form of fictive melodrama is packaged and sold as urgent news.

Viewed strictly through the lens of motion pictures, however, the Sunn films can be regarded as akin to Hollywood “women's pictures” of the 1940s (e.g., 1942's

¹⁰² Jacobs, Roddy. *Historic Jesus*.

Now, Voyager and 1945's *Mildred Pierce*), and to the daytime dramas that succeeded those films on television. Indeed, as the Sunn cycle draws to a close in the late '70s and early '80s, the films increasingly coming to resemble TV soap operas, Sellier's brilliance seems his ability to have made millions passing off ultra-low-budget weepies as topical exposes of rare, even supernatural power — as films that, as the publicity for *Beyond Death's Door* put it, could “change your life...and death.”¹⁰³

A definite last gasp of sorts, *Beyond Death's Door* (1979) finds Sunn ditching its documentary pretenses altogether in favor of a spiritual drama set at a small-town hospital where a busy doctor treats a flurry of patients who've been to the “other side” and have stories to tell — several involving encounters with a bearded man in a white robe, his head bathed in heavenly light. Divine though it may be, the film's inspiration appears to have come directly from Sunn's previous release, *Beyond and Back* (1978) — the company's last to contain documentary-style passages and its last to allege having been exhaustively researched.

Like *The Amazing World of Psychic Phenomena*, *Beyond and Back* alternates between dramatic “reenactments” and cut-rate special-effects sequences that carry litigiously strong intimations of the “Starchild” sequence in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Speaking of sci-fi blockbusters, one *Beyond and Back* vignette seems to invoke Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, particularly that 1977 film's climactic fantasy of a beleaguered father's spectacular escape from domestic drudgery (even as it harkens back to the great escape of Grizzly Adams).

¹⁰³ Original theatrical poster for *Beyond Death's Door* (1979). Sunn Classic Pictures. Retrieved on April 10, 2014 at http://www.impawards.com/1979/beyond_death's_door.html.

In Sunn's narrative, a recent car crash survivor tells his wife that, while comatose, he had been "in limbo, someplace between life and death. It was beautiful, so peaceful. I didn't want to come back." The man's evident triumph comes in telling his silent wife, as if threatening to pack his bags, "I am not afraid of death anymore."¹⁰⁴

Unsurprisingly, the female characters in *Beyond and Back* do not enjoy nearly the same freedom. In the film's penultimate "reenactment," a blatant anti-abortion tract, a woman discovers in the course of making dinner for her fiancée that he has fallen in love with someone else. Instantly suicidal, she drives her car off a cliff, whereupon she appears in the pit of hell, depicted by Sunn's non-unionized set designers as scarcely more frightening than the average junior-high haunted house.

Nevertheless, the woman appears later to have been scared straight, regretting her decision to endanger "children who'd never be born because I'd killed myself before they'd be conceived."¹⁰⁵ In *Beyond and Back*, a woman is a potential mother and nothing more, unless one counts her duties in the kitchen — although that work is evidently no guarantee of keeping a man.

Beyond and Back, which grossed an estimated \$23.8 million in '78¹⁰⁶, ends with a truly sensational preview of coming attractions — a purported dramatization of the viewer's own impending death, complete with a cameo appearance by Jesus. After that, '79's *Beyond Death's Door* can only pale in comparison, although it does

¹⁰⁴ Lord, Stephen. *Beyond and Back*. VHS. Directed by James L. Conway. Salt Lake City: Sunn Classic Pictures, 1978.

¹⁰⁵ Lord, *Beyond and Back*.

¹⁰⁶ Edgerton, p. 121.

distinguish itself within the Sunn oeuvre by featuring a person of color in a speaking role.

“What’s happenin’?” wonders an African American pimp who, after having been shot to death, seems to witness himself cavorting in the afterworld. “Hey, that’s me!” he exclaims. “But it ain’t!” Then he sees the “light,” i.e., Jesus, and comes back to earth rehabilitated, telling the hospital’s resident atheist, “God bless you, man!”¹⁰⁷

As for the atheist, he begins reading the Bible.

¹⁰⁷ Hobart, Fenton, Jr. *Beyond Death’s Door*. VHS. Directed by Henning Schellerup. Salt Lake City: Sunn Classic Pictures, 1979.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

In this thesis, I have employed the methodology of discursive transcoding to illuminate the connections between Sunn’s representations and, in Ryan and Kellner’s words, the “representations which give structure and shape to social life.”¹⁰⁸ The tools of discursive transcoding have allowed me to suggest ways in which the Sunn films promised and to some extent delivered a kind of mock-journalism while contributing to the construction of social reality in the late 1970s, following from the methodology’s bid to expose commercial art and reportage as part of a broader system of influential representations.

As discursive transcoding is the process by which the relationship between film and social history can be conceived, this thesis reveals Sunn’s body of work to have been a kind of sociopolitical intervention — in other words, a tool with which to support the ascendance of neo-conservatives and their social constructions of the late ‘70s and early ‘80s.

For purposes of this thesis’s argument that Sunn’s films helped to shape the sociopolitical climate as well as reflect it, Ryan and Kellner’s work in *Camera Politica* seems crucial, as it lays the groundwork for an understanding of representation as a precursor to reality.

[T]he sort of representations which prevail in a culture is a crucial political issue. Cultural representations not only give shape to psychological dispositions, they also play an important role in determining how social reality will be constructed... Film is the site of a contest of representations over what social reality will be perceived as being and indeed will be...[T]he sorts of economic and political crises that have occurred during [the early ‘70s] provoked psychological crises which were also crises of representation. Traditional ways of representing the world broke down; there was a tremendous loss of confidence in

¹⁰⁸ Kellner, Ryan, p. 302.

institutions. The cultural representations of leaders and of public virtue were eroded, and people whose psychological integrity depended on the internalization of those representations felt what psychologists call a loss of 'object constancy.' That is, their private representations no longer stabilized a secure world, and that loss of stability provoked anxiety.¹⁰⁹

As I have argued, the Sunn films metaphorically “reinstates stability” — i.e., white male conservative and patriarchal order — for those of Nixon’s “silent majority” who, amid the crises, real and imagined, of the time, had suffered a loss of “object constancy.” Not only tapping into public mistrust of old reliables but giving voice to it, the Sunn films posit “investigation” of the patently absurd as reassuring, particularly in relation to the sort of journalism that had uncovered a number of painful truths — thus the films’ implicit agenda to diminish the sociocultural esteem and political capital of investigative journalism. Scholars of journalism would do well to take a greater interest in cinema insofar as popular film, Sunn’s not least, serves as a kind of historical reportage — not of facts so much as feelings.

Particularly because Sunn worked unusually hard to tailor its messages to the researched needs of the audience, the company’s films can be seen as uncommonly illustrative of the public’s desires — or at least a key portion of that public.

Given that the mid-’70s working class comprised many of those Americans who would vote for Reagan on his implicit promise to spin what Sunn’s ad men called “conventional theories,” it seems important to note that Sunn explicitly “identified as its market working-class families who rarely went to the movies more

¹⁰⁹ ” Kellner, Ryan, p. 143.

than twice a year,” this according to Bruce A. Austin in *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences*.¹¹⁰

“Only 23 percent of the U.S. population sees movies with any regularity,” Sellier claimed in 1980. “Hollywood is just not making the kind of films that turn on the other 77 percent. All we did was find an angle that other people weren’t pursuing.”¹¹¹

Exactly who comprised this 77 percent? Cowie’s book on the ‘70s-era working class shows that a sizable audience in America felt hungry for validation of hopes that their luck could turn and that one’s spirit could be moved (at the movies and beyond), while Kotkin’s 1977 piece in the *Post* suggests that Sellier thought it was conservative families being underrepresented on screen. “Sellier believes Hollywood’s failure to tailor its products for family audiences is the key to Sunn Classic’s success,” Kotkin writes. “By its frequent use of explicit sex, violence and vulgarity, Sellier thinks mainline Hollywood has relinquished its hold on a large section of the movie-going public.”¹¹²

Judging from their extraordinary box-office success as well as their neo-conservatism as identified in the previous section, one can say that the Sunn films satisfied the hunger of many ‘70s viewers for escapism served alongside a heaping portion of comfort food in the form of confidently asserted conservative values. Writing about *The Mysterious Monsters* for the *Tucson Daily Citizen* in 1975, Chuck Graham pointedly opined, “Real life monsters are always a good subject to use in

¹¹⁰ Austin, p. 241.

¹¹¹ Morrisroe, p. 16.

¹¹² Kotkin, p. 10.

escaping reality for a while.”¹¹³ (Unless, of course, those “real life monsters” are Nixon and former secretary of defense Robert McNamara, for example.)

Moreover, the massively successful Sunn films can and should be seen to have supplanted the politically progressive documentary films of the 1960s and early ‘70s, at least in terms of grosses, whereby future financing is foretold. En route to becoming one of the most profitable nonfiction films ever released in the United States, *In Search of Noah’s Ark* saw its grosses surpass those of 1972’s biographical documentary *Malcolm X* (\$48.1 million in receipts), a film whose politics couldn’t possibly be more distinct from those of the Sunn pictures. It was not until the early 2000s, with the release of Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, that the socially critical tradition of U.S. documentary cinema returned to wide theatrical exposure, to box-office success and to the consciousness of U.S. critics and audiences.

Further research is suggested to make a case for the Sunn films as being precursors to current anti-scientific movements, including that to teach creationism alongside evolution and to argue that the United Nations is a conspiracy and global warming is a hoax. Such research seems important to the extent that contemporary journalists often write about these movements as if they came out of nowhere; the work of attending to Sunn films and others that cater to their audiences through direct marketing and church networks could allow journalists to tap into public sentiment that isn’t part of media discussion regarded as “elite.”

¹¹³ Graham, Chuck. (1975). The Mysterious Monsters. *Tucson Daily Citizen*, p. B1.

Particularly to the extent that misogyny often appears as much of a driving force as spirituality in the Sunn films, Cowie’s aforementioned view of the *Roe v. Wade* decision’s impact on conservative Christians — who felt that the “moral foundation of their world was being undermined”¹¹⁴ — seems useful to help explain both Sunn’s retaliatory ideological agenda and its movies’ enormous appeal among a particular portion of the ticket buying audience in the years after 1973.

As Sellier told the *Washington Post* in 1977, his finger evidently resting on the pulse of America: “I discovered there was a void for a particular kind of picture. The people are becoming more aware of what’s good for them. They’re becoming more uneasy with what’s been coming. There’s a demand for less violence and sex coming from a lot of people out there.”¹¹⁵

In the case of Sunn, supply met demand — and then some, as the company’s selective reflection of culture became, through one box-office hit after another, the shaping of culture. Sellier’s pricey research be damned: What the millionaire preacher seems to have discovered through divine intuition is that giving them what they want doesn’t preclude giving them what *you* want — and making them want that, too.

¹¹⁴ Cowie, p. 237.

¹¹⁵ Kotkin, p. 10.

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