



Research Article

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Радое В. ШОШКИЧ

ОТ МИФА К СИМУЛЯКРУ: ВИДЕНИЕ АМЕРИКИ СТИВА ТЕШИЧА

Аннотация: В последние десятилетия XX в. Стив Тешич утвердился в Голливуде как самобытный автор, предложивший целый ряд тем, облеченных в привычную форму классического киноповествования. Оставаясь в рамках мейнстрима, Тешич — югославский эмигрант — сумел создать уникальное художественное пространство, где личные воспоминания и социальный анализ переплетаются с мифопоэтическим воображением. В его работах воссоздан глубоко ностальгический образ Америки: Тешич воскрешает облик общества, которое к концу 1970-х гг. остановилось в своем развитии под тяжестью всеобщего разочарования и культурной апатии. Вдохновленные тем самым идеализмом, что когда-то привел автора в новую страну, его фильмы, тем не менее, пронизаны меланхолией изгнания. В них отчетливо слышен диссонанс между иммигрантской мечтой и той фрагментарной реальностью, с которой он столкнулся на деле. Киноязык Тешича строится на изящном сопряжении комического и критического; ему свойственны гуманная ирония и глубокая проработка характеров, выходящих за рамки привычных типажей. Это заставляет зрителя вступать в философский диалог о природе сопричастности, о вечном поиске и горечи утрат. Через мягкий юмор, за которым скрывается острое социальное чутье, сценарист исследует этические и эмоциональные основы «американской мечты», обнажая противоречия между индивидуумом и коллективным мифом. Из шести реализованных сценариев Тешича именно картины «Разрыв» (*Breaking Away*) и «Четыре друга» (*Four Friends*) наиболее полно воплощают его этическое и художественное мировоззрение. В данной статье эти произведения рассматриваются не просто как продукты индустрии развлечений, но как акты творческой интроспекции, подрывающие жанровые каноны. Такой подход позволяет увидеть в кино инструмент, способный нащупать хрупкую грань между частной судьбой человека и национальной идеологией.

Ключевые слова: Стив Тешич, американская мечта, Бодрийяр, Голливуд, симулякр, постиндустриальная идеология, иммиграция, классовая структура, *Breaking Away*, *Four Friends*

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FROM MYTH TO SIMULACRUM: STEVE TESICH'S VISION OF AMERICA

Abstract: In the closing decades of the twentieth century, Steve Tesich emerged in Hollywood as a distinctive authorial presence, introducing a constellation of themes articulated through the ostensibly familiar framework of the classical narrative form. Within the boundaries of mainstream cinematic production, Tesich — himself a Yugoslav émigré — carved out a singular creative space in which personal memory, social reflection, and mythic imagination converge. His work constructs a profoundly nostalgic vision of America, reanimating a social landscape that had, by the late 1970s, grown inert under the weight of disillusionment and cultural fatigue. Animated by the idealism that once drew him toward his adopted homeland, Tesich's films nonetheless register the melancholy of exile — the dissonance between the immigrant's dream of America and the fragmented reality that unfolds before him. His cinematic expression, delicately poised between comedy and critique, is marked by a tone of humane irony and by characterizations that transcend mere typology, inviting philosophical inquiry into the nature of belonging, aspiration, and loss. Through the gentle humor that masks a deeper social consciousness, Tesich interrogates the moral and emotional underpinnings of the American Dream, exposing the subtle tensions between personal authenticity and collective myth. Among his six realized screenplays, *Breaking Away* and *Four Friends* stand as the most emblematic articulations of Tesich's artistic and ethical vision. This paper examines these works not only as cultural texts inscribed within the conventions of the entertainment industry, but also as acts of introspection that destabilize those very conventions — revealing cinema's potential to negotiate the fragile boundary between individual experience and national ideology.

Keywords: Steve Tesich, American Dream, Baudrillard, Hollywood, simulacrum, post-industrial ideology, immigration, class structure, *Breaking Away*, *Four Friends*

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The Entertainment Industry and Steve Tesich in the Hollywood Simulacrum

Over the course of its century-long tradition, Hollywood cinema has established itself as a fundamental discourse within American cultural identity, all the while systematically eschewing any attribution of intellectual profundity to its own medium. Instead, it has persistently framed its societal function within the sphere of entertainment. Entertainment, in turn, has evolved into the ultimate imperative of popular culture — a universal social lubricant and an omnipresent ideological dictum. Within the promotional apparatus of every Hollywood blockbuster, audiences are presented with actor testimonials that depict the arduous creative process as an unceasing source of enjoyment, mirroring the declarations of American athletes who, despite experiencing defeat, fervently assert the immense pleasure derived from competition. Theorists of the Frankfurt School have been particularly incisive in their critique of this industrialized commodification of entertainment, characterizing it as an omnipresent mechanism that deceptively masquerades as happiness. Horkheimer and Adorno famously assert that “fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe,” yet the critical reach of their analysis remains largely confined within academic discourse, with limited penetration into the broader cultural consciousness.¹

¹ Horkheimer, Max, Adorno, Theodor W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford, 2002: 112. It should be noted, however, that the Frankfurt School’s concept of a singular, monolithic “culture industry” has since been substantially complicated. Beginning with Bernard Miège’s argument that cultural production is internally differentiated — governed by distinct economic logics, modes of financing, and audience relationships — and developed most systematically by David Hesmondhalgh into a full account of the plural “cultural industries,” the field has moved away from treating mass culture as a seamlessly unified ideological apparatus. On this revised account, Hollywood operates not as a single machine grinding out ideology but as a commercially dominant sector within a complex, internally contested media landscape, one in which the degree of standardization and the scope for creative autonomy vary considerably across formats, budgets, and distribution models. This distinction is not trivial for the purposes of the present argument. If the Frankfurt School’s diagnosis risks overstating the system’s coherence, Hesmondhalgh’s framework helps explain precisely the kind of exception that Tesich represents: an authorial voice that found traction within the studio system not despite its commercial logic but through the specific structural gaps — the low-budget prestige picture, the modestly scaled regional drama — that a more differentiated industry leaves open. Tesich’s career is, in this sense, a product of the cultural industries in the plural: intelligible only against the background of an entertainment landscape varied enough to accommodate, however briefly and marginally, work that refuses its dominant ideological imperatives. See [Hesmondhalgh 2002: 1–18; Miège 1979: 297–311].

The expectation that mainstream American cinema would evolve into a more direct reflection of prevailing social conditions gained traction several decades later, coinciding with Hollywood's most significant transformation since the introduction of synchronized sound. Influenced by Italian neorealism and the French New Wave, a new generation of filmmakers — often referred to as the “movie brats” — redefined the formal characteristics of the cinematic medium by transposing countercultural themes from the streets to the screen and challenging the limitations imposed by the studio system. This resurgence of auteur-driven filmmaking granted young directors an unprecedented degree of creative autonomy, enabling them to engage with contemporary political discourses and bring issues such as feminism, the sexual revolution, African American liberation, and leftist student movements to public attention. However, this period of cinematic reinvention gave rise to New Hollywood — an apparatus that, while cognizant of the transformed cultural landscape, remained deeply entrenched within the entertainment industry. This inherent commercial orientation contributed to the relatively swift decline of the critical and subversive ethos upon which the movement had initially been founded. Although Hollywood occasionally addresses pressing social issues, and at times even offers substantive commentary, its primary function persists as the mass production of entertainment, fabricating an idealized surrogate reality — akin to television's simulation of an exhilarating existence or social media's construction of an illusory sense of social connectivity.

The operations of the so-called “dream factory” are strategically framed as a noble endeavor to provide amusement for the working populace, thereby legitimizing the substantial financial gains derived from offering “bread and circuses” as an equitable exchange of commodities.² As Fredrick Jameson observes, in the era of multinational capitalism, the continued consolidation of capital through cultural production is an inescapable phenomenon, rendering the primacy of market-driven imperatives over artistic value in cinema an ostensibly natural condition.³ Hollywood film operates

² Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of the “culture industry” remains not only a critique of commodified pleasure but also a prophecy of the modern entertainment apparatus, whose efficiency lies precisely in its capacity to transform ideology into enjoyment. In this sense, Hollywood becomes the paradigmatic locus of what Herbert Marcuse would later describe as the “happy consciousness” — a social condition in which domination persists through the very experience of pleasure. Cf. Marcuse, H. *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston, 1964: 84–87.

³ Jameson, Fredrick. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, 1991: 54.

as a “highly industrialized and rationalized mode of commercial cinematic production driven by the logic of commodification and capital realization” [Kellner 2004: 205], ensuring that every stage of the filmmaking process remains contingent upon financial projections and economic feasibility. Long ago, Horkheimer and Adorno diagnosed this phenomenon, asserting that films no longer require artistic pretensions, as “the truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce,” with box office revenues deployed as an implicit validation of society’s purported demand for such cultural products.⁴

Beneath the ostensibly innocuous veneer of entertainment and the justification of legitimate profit, Hollywood’s construction of an escapist paradise constitutes a deliberate and ideologically charged process. In one of the foundational critical examinations of the studio system within the framework of American modernism, Robert Kolker contends that commercial cinema operates as a vehicle for “giving voice to dominant values, conventional wisdom, easy platitudes, and a determined effort to please its audience and caution them against overreaching” [Kolker 2011: xi]. The inherent aversion to financial risk compels Hollywood studios to privilege formulaic narrative structures, thereby reinforcing hegemonic cultural paradigms and perpetuating conventional representations of love, heroism, domesticity, class hierarchy, sexuality, and historical memory [Kolker 2011: 14]. Consequently, commercial cinema cannot be dismissed as a neutral industrial commodity, mechanically assembled and passively consumed within an ideologically inert space. Far from existing in a social vacuum, it frequently operates as an ideological construct — one that pacifies dissent, tacitly encourages civic conformity, and ultimately functions as an instrument in the broader apparatus that mediates and shapes collective perceptions of reality.

Within the framework of Hollywood’s profound influence on American cultural consciousness, Oscar Wilde’s assertion that reality imitates art, rather than the reverse, finds its fullest realization. Films are not merely constructed as reflections of culture; rather, culture perceives itself through the cinematic lens. Despite the frequent disjunction between the cinematic image and social reality, culture actively assimilates this idealized representation, embracing it as a definitive articulation of its own identity. This image, continuously reproduced by the entertainment industry, functions as a mechanism through which culture both venerates

⁴ Horkheimer, Max, Adorno, Theodor W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: 95.

itself and perpetuates its foundational myths. As a consequence, cinema does not passively depict reality but actively imposes a worldview, shaping collective perception and elevating the filmic image into a paradigmatic manifestation of Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum.⁵ In this process, the incessantly reproduced Hollywood image becomes entirely severed from any referential connection to the material world, entering the realm of pure simulation. No longer subordinate to the reality it purports to represent, the cinematic image assumes ontological primacy, supplanting reality itself. As Baudrillard observed during his travels across the United States, the dissolution of the boundary between the real and its cinematic representation led him to declare: "The cinema and TV are America's reality!"⁶

Baudrillard, in his critique of the mimetic nature of the American cultural ethos, asserts that much of the nation's allure resides in its inherently cinematic quality, remarking that

even outside the movie theatres the whole country is cinematic. The desert you pass through is like the set of a Western, the city a screen of signs and formulas. <...> The American city seems to have stepped right out of the movies.⁷

This observation resonates with the experience of Steve Tesich (1942–1996), who, upon his arrival in the so-called "promised land" at the age of fourteen, carried with him the expectation that America would mirror the world he had encountered through the medium of film while growing up in Užice, Yugoslavia. The profound influence of Hollywood cinema on the young Tesich was such that he initially perceived it not as an artistic construct but as an authentic representation of reality:

I completely believed it was all real life. It never even occurred to me that someone had written it. You just wanted to jump into the screen and spend a month with Tarzan or John Wayne.⁸

⁵ Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum suggests that the cinematic image no longer reflects or distorts reality but *replaces* it. The screen ceases to be a mirror of the world and becomes the world's substitute—a process that transforms spectatorship into a mode of ontological participation rather than perception. See Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor, 1994: 6–7.

⁶ Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. London, 1988: 104.

⁷ Ibid: 56–57.

⁸ O'Toole, Lawrence. "Broadway to Hollywood." *Film Comment*. November–December, 1981: 25. The immigrant's gaze, as Tesich embodies it, operates within

Whereas Baudrillard celebrates cinema as a medium that, in the hands of visionary directors, “explores the insignificance of the world through the image”⁹, Tesich’s formative years exemplify the tendency identified by the French theorist — an impulse to escape the “catastrophe of the real” by retreating into the “exile of the virtual” through film and television.¹⁰ From its very inception, Hollywood positioned itself as an ideological apparatus designed to “help ‘Americanize’ immigrants, to teach their audiences how to be good Americans” [Kellner 2004: 206]. Tesich had already internalized these ideological constructs well before his own migration to the United States. Immersed in the mythos of the American Dream — particularly as portrayed in adventure films and Westerns that glorified heroic archetypes, moral dichotomies, and the ultimate triumph of virtue — Tesich initially nurtured a utopian vision of America. However, over the decades, this idealized perception underwent a gradual process of revision. His disillusionment began with the harsh realities of life in the industrial landscapes of East Chicago, deepened as he witnessed the erosion of the civic ideals that had defined the 1960s, and ultimately culminated in his profound skepticism toward American foreign policy by the 1990s.

Tesich’s vision of America ultimately aligns with Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum, though it took him considerable time to recognize and reconcile with this reality. His intellectual trajectory reflects a prolonged journey from idealization to disenchantment. While Baudrillard, with characteristic sardonicism, conceptualized the simulacrum as emblematic of the postmodern dissolution of reality and the apocalyptic collapse of meaning, Tesich encountered the same phenomenon with a sense of ambivalence, struggling to articulate its implications. Despite his enduring affection for his adopted homeland, he gradually discerned the more disquieting aspects of the American Dream — particularly the extent to which cultural and political discourse had become subsumed within a hyperreal order. As an aspiring writer, he found limited public interest in narratives that operated beyond the confines of this simulacrum. Within a consumer-driven society, individuals prioritized ephemeral gratification,

a double vision: one of enchantment and estrangement. It corresponds to what Edward Said calls “the contrapuntal perspective” of exile — the ability to perceive two worlds simultaneously and to inhabit neither entirely. See Said, Edward. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA, 2000: 173–177.

⁹ Baudrillard, Jean. *Art and Artefact*. London, 1997: 10.

¹⁰ Baudrillard, Jean. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Bloomington, 1995: 28.

reducing the political sphere to an abstract construct devoid of immediate personal relevance, thereby necessitating no intellectual engagement.

As a young man, Tesich was actively involved in the antiwar protests of the 1960s, embracing the dynamism and mass mobilization of the era. However, by the close of the following decade, he witnessed the emergence of a pervasive social inertia, as American society largely perceived the cessation of activism not as an opportunity for reflection but as the welcome conclusion of a tumultuous chapter best relegated to historical amnesia. The protracted military engagements in Indochina, much like contemporary debates over accountability for conflicts in the Middle East, remained politically charged, yet the Vietnam War was never collectively acknowledged as a failure, nor were its lessons meaningfully integrated into the national consciousness. Within this evolving socio-economic paradigm, corporate media assumed a pivotal role in shaping public values and aesthetic sensibilities, reorienting ideological discourse toward an ever-intensifying culture of consumption.

Tesich channeled his growing disillusionment with the erosion of his idealized vision of America into his later plays.¹¹ In *The Speed of Darkness*, he set out to critically examine the moral and social standards shaping human conduct, interrogate the political dimensions of a rapidly evolving world, and reflect on how these transformations contribute to the increasing insignificance of the individual.

At its core, *The Speed of Darkness* confronts audiences with the trauma endured by war veterans, exposing both the imperial ambitions that precipitated the Vietnam War and the mechanisms through which the American collective conscience suppresses its memory. The play presents this historical amnesia as a form of ideological pollution—an unresolved trauma buried within the nation's immediate environment, much like toxic waste concealed beneath a thin veneer of consumerist affluence. The po-

¹¹ *The Speed of Darkness* (1989) forms part of Tesich's "moral tetralogy" — a sequence of plays comprising *Art and Leisure* (1977), *Square One* (1983), *The Speed of Darkness* (1989), and *On the Open Road* (1992). Across this cycle, Tesich explores the erosion of moral conviction and the individual's search for ethical coherence amid the disorienting pressures of late-twentieth-century America. His dramaturgy reveals a profound engagement with the Russian literary tradition — most notably the moral psychology of Dostoevsky, the spiritual humanism of Tolstoy, the tragic irony of Chekhov, and the social consciousness of Gorky. This synthesis of Slavic moral intensity and Western disillusionment lends Tesich's theatre its distinctive ethical gravitas: a tragicomic meditation on the persistence of conscience within an age of ideological decay. See [Šoškić 2017; Rothmayer 2002: 112–118].

tential dwelling place of future generations is thus tainted by a destructive cultural legacy, one that remains largely unacknowledged beneath the superficial allure of material prosperity.

Traces of satire can be discerned in Tesich's screenplays, though they remain subdued for two key reasons. By the late 1970s, Tesich did not yet identify himself primarily as a political writer. As an emerging author deeply enamored with America and the optimism of the 1960s, he initially felt no compelling need to offer a direct critique of imperial ideology, allowing his social commentary to remain implicit within warm, character-driven narratives. Furthermore, even had he written a politically charged work akin to his later dramas, such a project would likely have struggled to reach production. Still in the early stages of his screenwriting career, Tesich gravitated toward lighter themes, only feeling prepared to confront global political concerns after securing broader recognition. As he later reflected: "I have gotten much more than I ever hoped for, and that is why I now feel I should observe problems that affect the whole world."¹²

In contrast to his later dramatic works, Tesich's screenplays reveal a distinctively nostalgic tone.¹³ Aware that he has little to praise about the present, the writer often crafts his narratives from a retrospective distance, returning his characters to an idyllic past and seeking refuge in it. Tesich's cinematic expression is imbued with the innocence with which he absorbed films as a child, as though striving to maintain faith in those early images and in the myth of a land of freedom that offers opportunity to all, including him. Yet within this nostalgic view of the past lies a matured political sensitivity, particularly evident in his treatment of issues concerning class structure and immigration.

Hollywood's relationship with immigrant experience is, in historical terms, far older and more ambivalent than its institutional self-image as the custodian of a normative American story would suggest. From the silent era onward, immigrant experience had periodically surfaced on screen: from Thomas Ince's *The Italian* (1915) and Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917), through the ethnic melodramas of the Production Code era — culminating

¹² Stojanović, Dejan. "A Few Moments with Steve Tesich." *Pogledi*. April, 1992. www.dejanstojanovic.org/steve-tesich.html. Accessed: 21.9.2025.

¹³ Nostalgia in Tesich's cinema should not be mistaken for sentimental regression but understood as a phenomenological mode of memory — an attempt to reconstruct the ethical dimension of the past against the flattening temporality of postmodernity. Cf. Jameson, Fredrick. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: 279–296.

in Daniel Mann's *The Rose Tattoo* (1955) — to the immigrant-inflected social realism of the 1960s. Indeed, the studio system itself was substantially shaped by first-generation immigrants: the major studios were founded or co-founded by Jewish entrepreneurs from Eastern Europe — Goldwyn, Mayer, Zukor, Warner, Laemmle — whose outsider experience was foundational to Hollywood's early industrial and aesthetic development. Yet paradoxically, the cultural product these immigrants built served not to foreground ethnic or class difference but to systematically dissolve it into an assimilationist vision of Americanness. This is the central tension at the heart of Hollywood's self-constitution: an industry founded by immigrants that institutionalized, as its dominant ideological output, the erasure of precisely those multicultural and working-class dimensions of American life from which its founders had emerged. The moral framework through which this output was regulated adds a further complication. The Production Code Administration, which governed Hollywood content from 1934 under Joseph Breen's direction, was driven in large part by Catholic institutional pressure — the Legion of Decency exerting systematic influence over what could and could not be depicted on screen. What the studio system presented as generically “American values” was thus, in practice, a historically specific and internally negotiated ideological composite, one inflected by ethnic immigrant capital, Catholic moral conservatism, and the commercial imperative to reach the broadest possible audience simultaneously. Against this background, Tesich occupies a singular and paradoxical position. He enters Hollywood not as a member of the immigrant founding generation — whose assimilationist logic he might have been expected to perpetuate — but as a later arrival who uses the industry's own conventions to make visible what it had always preferred to render invisible. His distinctiveness lies not in the mere fact of immigrant authorship, which Hollywood had always accommodated in structural and managerial terms, but in his insistence on foregrounding the experiential texture of immigrant working-class life as a subject of genuine dramatic inquiry. It is in this context that Hollywood of that era functioned, in its dominant ideological output, as an ethnocentric mechanism, focused on what was generally perceived as the quintessentially American story, suppressing narratives that touched on the multicultural and class dimensions of American identity in ways that could not be comfortably assimilated into the dream factory's prevailing myths. Viewed through this lens, *Breaking Away* (1979) and *Four Friends* (1981) stand out in Tesich's body of work, as they explore the immigrant integration process in all its complexity and suggest the nar-

row opportunities available to the working class in the so-called land of opportunity. These themes are generally deemed unsuitable for the “dream factory,” despite immigrant and working-class communities comprising a significant portion of the electorate. Influenced by *The Godfather* (1972), which reimagines the myth of America’s creation, immigration began to gain partial acceptance as a profitable cinematic motif, while industrialization remained largely unattractive to major studios. Arthur Penn observes that Hollywood produces a multitude of films in which the working class is entirely absent, or represented by administrative workers, while manual laborers are largely ignored.¹⁴ In contrast, Tesich’s screenplays foreground protagonists from industrial centers, presenting America from the perspective of the marginalized, rendering his cinematic legacy a tribute to those whom Americans might call “unsung heroes.”

The primary principle that Tesich encountered in Hollywood was the dictum to “write about what you know,” a guideline that would imbue all his screenplays with a pronounced autobiographical dimension. In reexamining his personal life experiences, he initially revisits his student days in Indiana in *Breaking Away*, recalling the bicycle race in which he himself had participated. His former dedication to cycling emerges as a central motif in *American Flyers* (1985), while in crafting the character of the janitor Daryll in *Eyewitness* (1981), Tesich drew upon his own work experience as a janitor in Chicago to convey the sense of loneliness in the vast, empty corridors of towering buildings. Moreover, the driving narrative thread of the film — Daryll’s obsessive recording of television broadcasts featuring a news anchor with whom he is infatuated — stems from Tesich’s youthful fascination with CBS correspondent Lesley Stahl and his imaginative speculations about ways he might meet her. While *The World According to Garp* (1982) and *Eleni* (1985) are adaptations of novels, Tesich extracts themes from the source texts that resonate with his own past, such that both films are marked by the presence of an authoritarian maternal figure and the quest for an absent father. The protagonists of *Eleni* aspire to emigrate to America, where their royalist father awaits them, while Garp, much like Tesich, trains as a wrestler in college and later marries a woman who had always dreamed of wedding a writer. Ultimately, *Four Friends* stands out as Tesich’s most personal film, deeply rooted in his familial history and the intricate process of constructing a cohesive national identity.

¹⁴ Ciment, Michel. “Interview with Arthur Penn.” In *Arthur Penn: Interviews*, eds M. Chaiken, P. Jackson Cronin, 2008: 154.

***Breaking Away* and the Classism of a Classless Society**

Paradoxically, Tesich reached the pinnacle of his career at its very inception, securing for his debut film an accolade that millions of filmmakers aspire to but never attain in a lifetime. Competing against films of the caliber of *Manhattan*, *Being There*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, and *All That Jazz*, Tesich was awarded the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay in 1979 — a singular achievement within the Serbian cinematic landscape.

Much like its protagonists in the cycling race, *Breaking Away* achieved an unforeseen triumph as a complete outsider in the film industry. Produced on a modest budget, shot in a provincial setting by a director with a history of commercial failures, based on the debut screenplay of an unknown writer, and featuring an unestablished ensemble cast, the film seemed, at least on paper, to possess little commercial promise. Initially slated for limited release in only a handful of cities, *Breaking Away* experienced an unexpected surge in demand, leading to widespread distribution. It swiftly grossed \$20 million against a modest budget of \$2.4 million, garnered a multitude of awards along with five Academy Award nominations, and ultimately attained such widespread popularity that it inspired both a television series and a Bollywood remake.

The film emerged through the initiative of Peter Yates, who had directed Tesich's play *Passing Game* in New York in 1977. After reading Tesich's screenplays *Eagle of Naptown* and *The Cutters*, Yates proposed a project that would merge the protagonist of the former with the atmosphere of the latter [Stempel 2000: 183]. Based on this concept, Tesich developed a working draft titled *Bambino*, which would eventually evolve into *Breaking Away*. Although Yates had established a reputation as an action director, in this film he relied on the warmth of Tesich's screenplay and the writer's nuanced depiction of Americana. Set in the Midwest, specifically Indiana — an archetypal “flyover state” in the American imaginary — *Breaking Away* was conceived from the outset as a modest production, without aspirations of making a significant impact on the mainstream market. The film's visual identity is immediately distinguished by its realistic cinematography, devoid of polished imagery or grandiose set design, allowing the camera to capture the small-town atmosphere with remarkable authenticity. Shot primarily on location and making extensive use of natural lighting, the film exudes

an unpretentious and fresh aesthetic, aligning in many ways with the emerging wave of independent cinema.

Breaking Away operates within the generic frameworks of the coming-of-age drama, family comedy, and sports film, portraying a group of young men from working-class families as they grapple with their aspirations after finishing high school. The film opens with a highly symbolic scene in which the protagonists ascend a rocky incline and traverse the ruins of an abandoned quarry — an unmistakable foreshadowing of the obstacles that lie ahead. Upon reaching the summit, they descend to their favorite spot, where they leap into a lake that has formed in the former excavation site. The lake's beauty appears almost surreal amidst the post-industrial wasteland, and their plunge into its waters signifies a leap into freedom, a moment of purification from the stagnation of their everyday lives. They reside in the town of Bloomington, a community that struggles to accommodate the ambitions of its adolescent population. Although Bloomington is home to Indiana University, the college is predominantly attended by students from outside the town and from more privileged backgrounds. This socioeconomic divide renders the local youth alienated from the university students to such an extent that they find it difficult even to imagine themselves crossing over to “the other side” when autumn arrives.

For this reason, Tesich's protagonists question whether they should dare to leave their familiar environment:

Cyril: My old man says Jesus never went more than fifty miles from his home. Mike: And look what happened to him!

The boys, upon finishing high school, find themselves in a situation where they can no longer move forward by inertia or make decisions as a group. Instead, they must rely on their individual abilities and set their next goals — not based on fantasies, but on practicality. They do not express clear ambitions for further education, as employment in the local industry, which sustains the entire town, presents itself as an almost inevitable choice. As they search within themselves for the potential to achieve something beyond what their parents have, they face questions for which they have no ready answers. They become acutely aware that choosing work over college means resigning themselves to a life they see playing out daily on the streets of Bloomington. This life undoubtedly offers the security they grew up with, but also imposes limitations that clash with the boundless dreams of nineteen-year-olds.

The protagonist of the film is Dave Stohler, a romantic dreamer fanatically devoted to cycling and obsessed with professional Italian cyclists, with whom he strongly identifies. Yearning to escape the monotony of provincial life — yet aware that this very life is likely his future — he uses cycling as a medium to adopt an Italian identity, adding an exotic dimension to his existence. Dave abruptly immerses himself in the Italian language and culture, often engaging in a comically broken version of instant Italian, reminiscent of the kind occasionally heard from taxi drivers in Kragujevac today. He sings opera arias around the house, douses himself in Italian cologne, persuades his mother to cook Italian dishes, and even renames his father's cat, Jake, to Fellini, feeding him from an Italian bowl.

Dave's steadfast commitment to his dreams signals a character ready to face the challenges ahead, a quality Tesich emphasizes in scenes like his race against a truck or his confrontation with Italian cyclists. In contrast, his friends — Mike, Cyril, and Moocher — demonstrate less determination in shaping their own futures, instead resigning themselves to letting the future shape them. Mike already envisions himself as a bitter forty-year-old, viewing his past as a failure — one from which there is no escape. "These college kids here, they'll never get old or out of shape, because every year new ones come," he laments, aware that students will always be around to remind him that, when it mattered most, he wasn't ready to take the leap and go to college. Mike was once the star quarterback of his high school football team, accustomed to leading but ultimately held back by his own insecurities, which cost him a scholarship and a chance to continue his athletic career. His disappointment runs so deep that he gives up on any fight before it even begins. To him, Bloomington becomes "B-town," a place he'd rather escape, preferably into the wilderness, away from people. Cyril, too, failed to secure the basketball scholarship he had hoped for, but he accepts this defeat with a resignation instilled in him by his father, who had long made him feel inferior. Moocher, on the other hand, has no lofty expectations to begin with; without much hesitation, he marries a girl from the same working-class background, whose ambitions extend no further than the local grocery store where she works as a cashier. Ultimately, Mike's older brother chooses the unpopular path of becoming a police officer — something that fills Mike with deep shame.

The inhibition of collective class consciousness in America results in "the absence of a widely accepted theory of class and its integration with other forms of structural social division" [James 2004: 186]. This, in turn, leads to a lack of theoretical tools for academic inquiries into class issues while

allowing cinema to either ignore or rely on stereotypical representations of interclass social dynamics. At the core of *Breaking Away*'s screenplay is precisely this class dimension, where the divide between working-class youth and privileged students disrupts the American Dream. Tesich builds dramatic tension by sharpening the contrast between the limited prospects of local young men and the boundless opportunities awaiting students after graduation, thus underscoring the existence of class divisions in a society that perceives itself as classless. By doing so, the author infuses his seemingly innocent coming-of-age story with a political context atypical for major studios, as class privilege and inequality among nominal equals are rarely placed at the forefront of American mainstream genre cinema. The qualification is important. American literary and cinematic culture had not, of course, ignored class entirely: the screen adaptations of Theodore Dreiser — most notably Josef von Sternberg's *An American Tragedy* (1931) and George Stevens's *A Place in the Sun* (1951) — and the Fitzgerald adaptations, from the various screen versions of *The Great Gatsby* onward, had placed social stratification at the center of their dramatic logic. The distinction that matters, however, is one of genre and mode of address. Literary adaptation of canonical novels representing class as tragic fate belongs to a specific prestige register of Hollywood production — one that inherits the authority of an established literary text, addresses a self-consciously educated audience, and presents class critique as aesthetically legitimated by its source material. What this tradition does not do, and what Tesich does, is take class as a structural condition of ordinary life in a provincial American community and embed it within the conventions of genre cinema — the coming-of-age drama, the sports film, the family comedy — forms whose ideological function is precisely to naturalize upward mobility and dissolve class antagonism into individual effort and communal good feeling. To introduce class consciousness into these genres is a fundamentally different and more destabilizing gesture than to adapt a Dreiser novel: it refuses the safe distance of literary prestige and insists that the machinery of popular entertainment confront what it is designed to efface. It is in this specific sense — not as a claim about American cultural life in its entirety, but as a claim about the ideological operations of mainstream genre filmmaking — that class privilege and inequality are atypical subjects for major studio production. Standardization is the norm of mass production, requiring films to conform to an industrial mold that promotes the conservative Hollywood ideal: the exemplary American will overcome any obstacle—whether of race, class, gender, or sexuality — by following

the rules and working hard. Contrary to this pattern, Tesich portrays class as an actual constraint on the utopian vision of equal opportunity. His protagonists have not violated any societal norms, yet they find themselves at a dead end simply because they are bound by their subordinate position in the community's economic structure.

In this sense, *Breaking Away* can be seen as the precursor to an idea of social segregation that Tesich would radicalize a decade and a half later, describing it as “niggerization,” a system in which one can either be a respectable white person who adheres to “soft values” or an outcast unworthy of that supposedly libertarian concept. While the language in *Breaking Away* is considerably milder, the underlying designation remains the same. The student jargon brands the working-class residents of Bloomington as “cutters,” a reference to the limestone quarry that drives the town's economy. In a society divided not by skin color but by financial status, the “cutters” are the Black population of Bloomington. Much like African Americans, they reclaim the pejorative term as their own while refusing to let outsiders use it against them. The “cutters” are the laborers striving to break free from the shadow of their designation, fighting to ensure that their children do not become the next generation of “cutters.”

Thus, it is no coincidence that Tesich compares his protagonists to displaced Native Americans and the college students to white settlers who seize their land and future. Mike would resolve the conflict through direct confrontation, while Cyril leans toward compromise: “There aren't many of us redskins left. Too many pale-face students. I advise peace.” Mike's impulsiveness only exacerbates the problem, whereas Cyril's peacekeeping approach merely upholds the status quo, leaving the locals stranded without a path forward. Tesich, therefore, places the resolution in the character of Dave's father, Ray, whose experience suggests that education is the only tool of class struggle available to a “cutter's” child. As a former stonecutter, Ray has climbed the social ladder as far as he could — to the position of a used-car salesman. His visit to his former colleagues at the quarry is cordial, yet their remarks that Ray now looks like an inspector or a union official subtly comment on his shift to a higher social class, marking Tesich's nuanced depiction of small-town class structures. Ray envisions a different future for his son, which is why he indirectly encourages him to pursue higher education.

Alongside newcomer Daniel Stern, who plays Cyril, the excellent Paul Dooley, in the role of Ray, carries much of the film's comedic dynamic. However, Tesich also entrusts him with a serious mission. In a pivotal con-

versation with Dave, Ray bears witness to the disillusionment of the laborers who built the grand structures of Indiana University, only to realize that the prosperity they helped create was never meant for their class. The buildings erected by the previous generation form one of the most beautiful campuses in America, yet for the builders themselves, they have become temples of wealth — inescapable reminders of class disparity. Students look down upon the descendants of the workers who constructed the campus they inhabit, while local youth are left with nothing but the gaping hole of the quarry, the only trace of their parents' labor. The contrast between these two striking locations — the abandoned quarry and the opulent university buildings that emerged from it — serves as the film's central metaphor, a stark image of privilege and those who enable it, only to be excluded from its rewards.

Tesich shifts the class struggle onto the sports field, symbolically representing it through a cycling showdown between the locals and the students. He employs the well-worn trope of the underdog's triumph — a tried-and-true method for winning over audiences. It is the familiar David-and-Goliath battle, yet the screenwriter rescues it from monotony with a richly developed background and a layer of social commentary rarely found in generic sports films, which typically focus solely on the journey from obscurity to glory. Such films often take a reductive approach to competition, pushing a naïve ambition and a linear view of life that feels like it came straight out of a Nike commercial. By contrast, Tesich's underdogs carry a different message written on their foreheads: "You can't do it." This is a class-based defeatism born of a long-accumulated sense of inferiority — a state of mind that corresponds to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* as an "internalized form of class condition and the constraints it entails."¹⁵ Tesich first firmly establishes his protagonists as losers before guiding them, step by step, along the familiar path to triumph. The journey is filled with setbacks and tension, but its outcome is never in doubt. The "cutters" team starts in last place, steadily overtakes competitor after competitor, and finally takes the lead — only for the main rider to suffer an injury, seemingly extinguishing all hope for the locals. The team drops

¹⁵ Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, 1984: 101. Tesich's depiction of working-class habitus aligns with Antonio Gramsci's insight that hegemony is sustained not merely through coercion but through the internalization of cultural norms that render subordination appear as common sense. See Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York, 1971: 323–326.

back to sixth place, yet through the superhuman effort of their leader, they stage one last comeback and ultimately claim victory.

In the ideological symbiosis of sports and Hollywood, sports films provide neatly wrapped endings that awaken the audience's competitive spirit and convey a conventional moral message, reinforcing a social order proportional to the effort invested. Triumph arrives as a reward for perseverance, creating the impression that, from the start of the race, the final outcome depends less on the objective quality of the favorite and more on the strength of the underdog's will. Dave is disadvantaged by the clumsiness and lack of determination of his teammates, an inferior bicycle, the absence of a coach, a start from the back of the pack, and, ultimately, an injury. Yet, despite all this, he still delivers a spectacle in which competitor number 34 overtakes number 1, and the local team snatches victory from the favored students. With such a resolution, *Breaking Away* merges into the corpus of sports films where racial, class, or gender struggles that initially burden the athlete's rise to the top are seemingly dissolved in the sheer force of their performance. Through these triumphs of shadowed heroes, Hollywood perpetuates an image of sports as a field of free competition — a metaphor for market competition in which the social outsider is encouraged to keep struggling, even though they have long been caught in a web from which there is little real hope of escape.

The competitive scenes, at their climactic moment, routinely affirm a conservative vision of society by reinforcing "American beliefs in individuality, ad hoc solutions, and the transience of all political problems" [Ray 1985: 31]. While the sports film as a whole emphasizes the value of teamwork and fair play to prevent the image of athletic competition from dissolving into social Darwinism, the crucial moment shifts focus to the key player. The official race announcer, played in a cameo role by Dave Blaze himself, praises the team spirit of cycling, yet the fate of the "Cutters" team rests solely on Dave's performance. At the point when his surroundings accept defeat and seem content with mere participation, Dave, as the unquestioned individualist, takes matters into his own hands and pushes toward victory. This act marks the end of egalitarian ideals about role redistribution and equal contributions, reducing the team to a social structure whose primary function is to support the potential of the best individual — the one who alone will bring success to the community. Triumph is depicted as the result of individual heroism rather than collective dedication, mythologizing individualism and affirming meritocracy as an inherent

social force — a form of cosmic justice that, within the American market, inevitably balances all accounts.

Tesich's portrayal of the race largely follows the conventions of mainstream sports films, yet the irony lies in the absence of a traditional Hollywood resolution — one in which the underestimated athlete surpasses expectations and ascends to a grander stage, captivating the nation. Instead, by deliberately omitting any discussion of Dave's potential professional cycling career, Tesich subtly underscores the hollowness of sports dreams. From Tesich's perspective, Mike's bleak vision of the future is not merely cynical but likely prescient. This is not a matter of optimism versus pessimism but a clear-eyed recognition of the brutal realities of competition and opportunity — of athletic talent as a fleeting commodity in a market that exalts only the victors while discarding those who falter. In this unforgiving arena, the fallen are left on society's margins, forced to reckon with the wreckage of their abandoned ambitions.

Tesich does not equate the underdog's victory with the promise of a brilliant sports career but rather with class emancipation. Dave's true triumph lies in recognizing his own worth, while professional cycling remains an unattainable dream. His decision to pursue higher education affirms that his race trophy is not a prelude to world domination or the ascent to athletic glory seen in *Rocky* (1976) and its derivatives. Instead, it serves as a simple affirmation of human dignity and the belief in the value of struggle, even when the reward remains uncertain. This resolution enriches the full symbolic meaning of *Breaking Away*. Initially referring to the pivotal moment in the race when Dave breaks free from the pack, the title evolves into a metaphor for his coming of age and readiness to leave behind the comfort of home, family, and friends. Just as Ray broke away from the stonecutters, Katherine from her family, and Tesich from his homeland, Dave sets out from the world that shaped him, liberating himself from parochialism and the constraints of class.

Dave's victory extends beyond himself to the community, easing the tensions that have driven the film's conflict. The leader of the college team applauds the winners with genuine admiration, Mike reconciles with his uniformed brother, and Dave's father — at last proud of his son — even takes up cycling, a symbolic act of bridging the generational divide. Before the final shot, which, accompanied by Indiana's state anthem, pays homage to the citizens of Bloomington and the University, the camera reveals two key details: Ray has renamed his business from "Campus Cars" to "Cutter Cars," and the Stoller family is expecting a new member. These subtle

yet powerful gestures, along with Dave's personal emancipation, serve as Tesich's ultimate affirmation of faith in the resilience of the working class and the future of the local community.

Four Friends as an Immigrant Epic

Produced during a period when Arthur Penn's directorial vigor had somewhat waned, *Four Friends* exhibits certain technical inconsistencies, including uneven editing, variable performances, and occasional lapses into sentimentality. Nevertheless, in terms of thematic depth, the film remains a poignant exploration of immigrant identity and the socio-political upheavals that defined America in the 1960s.

By spanning an entire decade, *Four Friends* positions itself as a generational narrative, inviting audiences to engage in a retrospective contemplation of the era. This temporal breadth aligns the film with the cultural memory of the period, evoking associations with *American Graffiti* (1983) and its famous tagline: "Where were you in 1962?" While expectations may have inclined toward a nostalgic reaffirmation of countercultural idealism akin to *Alice's Restaurant* (1969), Penn instead presents a more mature and sobering reassessment of the decade. The result is a film that eschews romanticized portrayals in favor of a nuanced and historically grounded meditation on the complexities of identity, assimilation, and the evolving American landscape.

The film, while thematically akin to Penn's earlier work, lacks the exuberance and optimism characteristic of the era it portrays. Instead, *Four Friends* is suffused with a melancholic nostalgia, even a sense of disillusionment and bitterness, positioning it as a "song of experience" in contrast to the "song of innocence" embodied by *Alice's Restaurant*. The film's commercial failure can be attributed to multiple factors: audiences' expectations for a more buoyant tone, the inadequate promotional campaign following the bankruptcy of its distributor, "Filmways¹⁶," and its engagement with politically sensitive themes such as immigration and class struggle. Yet, despite these obstacles, *Four Friends* endures as a poignant reflection on a bygone era — an earnest and deeply human narrative populated by vivid, empathetically drawn characters. The film's sincerity is evident in its affectionate portrayal of its protagonists and its unfiltered critique of the socio-political landscape. As a result, it has

¹⁶ Leroux, Andre. "The Path to Consciousness." In *Arthur Penn: Interviews*: 171.

retained the enduring admiration of a discerning audience that aligns with the political sensibilities of both Penn and Tesich.

Tesich embraces the characterization of the 1960s as a decade defined by “extreme idealism and extreme disillusionment¹⁷,” a view that aligns with Penn’s equally ambivalent perspective.¹⁸ For Penn, the sixties embody a mindset with which he has long identified — a sense of belonging to a group of outsiders, in opposition to authority and the established order.¹⁹ He concedes that, although he “often admired what was happening in the sixties,” he regrets that “unfortunately, the country soon returned to its slumber.²⁰” In a 2007 conversation, Penn reflects on the anti-Vietnam War protests and the fight against racism as significant advances, but he stresses that he never regarded the period “seriously,” seeing it more as theatrical display than genuine revolutionary fervor.²¹ Similarly, Tesich detects a similar affectation in the communes of the 1960s, observing that “if you were a political activist, you held your coffee cup with both hands, as if sitting around a campfire in Bolivia with Che.²²” Despite this, Tesich, being younger, cultivates a more nostalgic view of the sixties, underscoring that the ideals of the era played a pivotal role in shaping his personal identity: “I walked through college always under the influence of the next idea I encountered, but by the mid-sixties, it seemed as though I was becoming what I am today.²³”

In contrast to the adage that those who remember the sixties never truly lived in them, Tesich in *Four Friends* reconstructs the America of his youth with both emotional depth and precision, attuned to the social currents of the time. The ambition of the project results in a layered film that addresses an array of themes during the protagonist’s epic journey through existential dilemmas and a nation in turmoil. While the film undoubtedly serves as Tesich’s love letter to his new homeland and a return to cherished

¹⁷ Amata, Carmine. “Penn/Tesich/Georgia’s Friends.” *Films & Filming*, no. 332 (1982): 22.

¹⁸ Tesich’s chronicle of the 1960s captures what Charles Taylor terms the “malaise of immanence” — the modern condition in which transcendence has been displaced by an excess of possibilities, leaving the individual oscillating between utopian fervor and existential fatigue. Cf. [Taylor 2007: 302–308].

¹⁹ Amata, Carmine. “Penn/Tesich/Georgia’s Friends”: 22.

²⁰ Ciment, Michel. “Interview with Arthur Penn”: 153.

²¹ *Arthur Penn: Interviews*, eds M. Chaiken, P. Cronin: 210–211.

²² Cohen, Barney. “Steve Tesich Turns Memories into Movies.” *New York Times* (January 17, 1982): 44.

²³ Amata, Carmine. “Penn/Tesich/Georgia’s Friends”: 22.

memories, it also raises complex issues related to the integration of immigrants, the exploitation of the working class, generational conflict, racism, the Vietnam War, disability, and even incest. Many of these themes do not receive the attention they deserve, which is understandable given the limitations of the filmic format and the fact that none of them individually serves as the primary focus of the screenplay. Tesich could easily have shifted focus and neglected the politics of the era, but he chose instead to briefly acknowledge these issues, offering a more comprehensive retrospective that underscores the serious problems America continues to struggle with.

As a coming-of-age drama set against the backdrop of the working-class milieu, *Four Friends* shares significant thematic and tonal affinities with *Breaking Away*. In their quest to escape the constraints of Eisenhower-era conservatism, the protagonists of *Four Friends* embark on a transformative journey that the characters in *Breaking Away* were ultimately unable to undertake. Whereas *Breaking Away* nostalgically celebrates the final collective triumph of a group of adolescents, *Four Friends* charts the divergent personal trajectories of its counterparts as they navigate the broader currents of American history and culture.

Although *Breaking Away* is also based on personal experiences, *Four Friends*, as a chronicle of the immigrant experience, is thematically even closer to Tesich, who described the screenplay as “the most autobiographical thing I have ever written.”²⁴ The deeply personal nature of the narrative becomes evident in the film’s opening scene, which, accompanied by the melody of “Tamo daleko,” reenacts Tesich’s arrival in America and his first encounter with his father.²⁵ Thus, the film is not merely Tesich’s evocation of the United States in the 1960s but also a reflection on his own immigrant history and the construction of his national identity — an experience that resonates with Penn’s, given his own immigrant background. When asked about the authenticity of the film’s portrayal as captured on screen, Tesich

²⁴ Drew, Bernard. “Yates and Tesich Shift Gears.” *American Film* 6, no. 5 (1981): 53.

²⁵ The inclusion of the Serbian folk song “Tamo daleko” (“There, Afar”) infuses the opening sequence with a profound autobiographical resonance. Composed during the First World War as a lament for exile and national suffering, the song has become an emblem of displacement in the Serbian cultural imagination — a hymn of both mourning and endurance. Its presence in Tesich’s filmic narrative thus transforms a private moment of immigration into a collective meditation on loss, belonging, and historical memory. In this interweaving of personal and national exile, Tesich reaffirms what Milan Kundera calls “the unbearable lightness of being elsewhere”: the paradoxical condition in which nostalgia becomes a mode of identity.

affirmed his satisfaction with the way “this film represents what I feel about America, both as an immigrant and as someone who now considers himself an American.”²⁶

The central character of the film, Danilo Prozor, serves as both a narrative conduit through which the author reexamines his own life and a lens through which the audience perceives an allegorical vision of America. As the closest reflection of Tesich’s experience as a first-generation immigrant, Danilo encapsulates the author’s profound ambivalence toward America, embodying the bittersweet nature of this relationship. His perception of America is directly expressed through his relationship with Georgia, the local girl with whom all his friends are enamored. Sweet and effervescent, Georgia personifies America itself: youthful, vibrant, free-spirited, optimistic, seductive, and utterly irresistible — yet profoundly unpredictable. Her disregard for convention enhances her charm, yet she is also superficial, naïve, careless, and self-centered, resistant to compromise and reluctant to embrace alternative perspectives, rendering her fundamentally disconnected from reality. In this regard, Georgia emerges as a folk counterpart to James’s Daisy Miller or Fitzgerald’s Daisy Buchanan — an object of Danilo’s adoration that remains ultimately elusive. Their relationship is turbulent, shaped by stark differences in character, clashing values, and diverging aspirations, ensuring that any reconciliation between them is fleeting at best.

In an early scene that epitomizes the emotional and sexual restraint of adolescents prior to 1967 and the famed “Summer of Love,” Danilo refuses to consummate his relationship with Georgia, fearing that doing so would diminish his idealized vision into mere reality. His excuse — that his father is sleeping in the adjacent room — signals a deeper anxiety about the potential reaction of the immigrant community should his desire for America be revealed. Georgia’s response, urging him not to wake his father, symbolically represents America’s invitation to sever ties with Serbia and to leave the past unspoken. While Danilo initially resists temptation, preserving his connection to his cultural heritage, over the course of the film, all four young men ultimately share moments of intimacy with Georgia. The film’s working title, *Georgia’s Friends*, underscores how their relationships with Georgia — who personifies America — mirror the intensity of their engagement with its cultural and historical landscape. The volatility of their romantic entanglements reflects the broader societal upheaval of

²⁶ Amata, Carmine. “Penn/Tesich/Georgia’s Friends”: 22.

the era, illustrating Tesich's intricate narrative interplay between personal and collective history.

Following the adventures of his protagonists, Tesich constructs a chronological depiction of the evolving relationship between politics and counterculture throughout the 1960s. As the first rupture between the new generation and tradition, he envisions a high school revolt that foreshadows the student protests and resistance to the Vietnam War. The image of the Kennedy couple ascending a staircase in slow motion serves as a visual cue for their meteoric political rise, while a racially motivated assault on the beach anticipates the civil rights movement. In a later bar fight scene that satirizes the Western genre, Tesich delivers an instance of his signature irony: the clumsy high school bully, once the instigator of racist violence, now appears in a police uniform. While this transformation carries a comedic effect, it simultaneously underscores society's tendency to entrust progress to its most regressive elements and to place the maintenance of law and order in the hands of those who so recently defied it.

The scene that Jonathan Demme calls "an immortal, cosmic, <...> quintessentially American moment" [Segaloff 2011: ix] and Kolker describes as "the semiology of the late sixties" takes place in 1969, when Danilo visits his friend Tom, who has returned from the war and married a Vietnamese woman [Kolker 2011: 57]. As Danilo watches the televised broadcast of the moon landing, awed by the triumph of the American spirit, the frame shifts to two bewildered Vietnamese girls, while their mother struggles to start a lawnmower in the yard. Just as he and his characters came of age in the sixties, Tesich notes that "the United States also went through a crucial period in which it was forced to mature, confront, and grapple with ideas it had long avoided as a nation.²⁷" One such idea, undoubtedly, is Vietnam, and the scene in Tom's home stands as one of the most poetic visions of cultural convergence and global reconciliation in American cinema.

The core of Tesich's screenplay, which weaves together the scattered threads of the story into a cohesive structure, is the evolution of Danilo's relationship with his new homeland. Initially enchanted by America, Danilo believes it offers him a richer life than the modest future his father envisions for him. Like Stojan, who became Steve, he adopts the name Danny and sings the national anthem with pride and joy. In a scene borrowed from *Four Friends*, the anthem, sung in a stadium, momentarily

²⁷ Ibid.

suspends all tensions and unites people under a single flag, erasing racial and class distinctions. As his friend Louie observes, “Danilo never refers to this country as the United States — he always calls it America. To him, it’s not a political union, but a childhood ideal.” Danilo strives toward the myth of equality, a notion that leaves Louie, the wealthy child of privilege, entirely indifferent, his only reaction being mild curiosity at Danilo’s fascination. Tesich, however, understands this concept best, evoking the dreamy spirit of a Serbian boy gazing into Hollywood’s vision of the American dream — one who could never have imagined he would become an American himself, creating his own cinematic worlds. In this sense, the image of Danilo singing the anthem from the heart can be seen as Tesich’s expression of gratitude for the opportunity he was given.

Confronted with the barrier of class ineligibility, Danilo is unwilling to follow his father’s path and struggle to overcome it; instead, he attempts to circumvent it by marrying a wealthy girl. On his way to his fiancée’s home, he unexpectedly faces a new choice. Driving in the right lane, he is overtaken on the left by a bus full of African Americans heading to a civil rights protest. Danilo’s political sensibility urges him to join the struggle of the oppressed. Yet, upon reaching the intersection, he ultimately chooses not to follow the bus, opting instead to remain on the right-wing path leading to a life of comfort.

Arthur Penn characterizes Danilo’s decision as a “hungry social leap” — one that, although not inherently attractive, nevertheless “occurred to many members of the first generation of immigrants in America” [Segaloff 2011: 232]. Among these was Tesich himself, who, at the final moment, refrained from entering into such a marriage. To illustrate the extreme resistance to the aspiration of ascending into high society through matrimonial alliances, Tesich constructs the figure of a wealthy patriarch who cannot tolerate his daughter’s marriage below his own social echelon, rendering their relationship almost incestuous in its symbolic contamination. The ensuing conflict culminates in a farcical display of violence, which serves to exemplify the drastic measures to which the privileged are prepared to resort in defense of their occupied social territory.

“If there is one myth I can no longer believe in, it is the myth that we in the United States live in a classless society,” explains Tesich.²⁸ Severely punished for transgressing class boundaries, his impetuous immigrant self barely survives the collision with capitalist forces. Danilo seeks refuge

²⁸ Ibid.: 23.

in the urban slums of New York, yet misfortunes in this so-called paradise are not confined solely to the upper echelons of suburban society; there is no escape from the tumult of the sixties. Penn's portrayal of New York — a city in decay, burdened by poverty and unrest — signals a definitive shift in the film toward a rightward ideological orientation. In one particularly charged scene, an incident at Georgia's party is deliberately chosen to illustrate "the New York counterculture of that era, which ultimately descended into madness, with people literally hurling themselves out of windows."²⁹ An allegorical depiction of the protests, in which a burning American flag crashes onto Danilo's windbreaker and obscures his view, comes to symbolize the collapse of his revolutionary ideals regarding America. Overwhelmed by the nihilism inherent in the flag's conflagration, Danilo silently observes Penn's inverted portrayal of *Alice's Restaurant*, wherein human husks are elevated as bearers of grand ideas, and the vacuity of hippie ideology reaches a level of bizarre absurdity. The romantic fervor of the era is waning, and the attractive Georgia declares that she is tired of youth, evoking the image of a disenchanting, lost America, poised to retreat once again into the safe harbor of conservatism.

This anticlimax underscores how both Tesich and Penn perceive the sixties as a decade fraught with profound contradictions, positioning the collapse of American civic hope as a pivotal moment leading into the political realities of the eighties, the period when the film was made. Reflecting on Vietnam and the broader failure of the ideologies of his youth, Tesich observes,

No one was willing to admit we had lost. Had we faced that truth, had we questioned what had gone wrong, we might have known where to begin again. Instead, we entered a long period of spiritual repression.³⁰

Four Friends captures the early signs of this repression, offering a glimpse of a culture, as Tesich sees it³¹, merely waiting for a significant event to digest it and then expel it as trivial. Despite its critical stance, Tesich's cinematic vision is ultimately one of warmth. Penn detects

²⁹ Ciment, Michel. "Interview with Arthur Penn": 154.

³⁰ Smith, Sam. "Breaking Down: Steve Tesich's Bleak Vision of America in Decline." *Chicago Tribune*. April 23, 1989. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1989-04-23/entertainment/8904060534_1_steve-tesich-vietnam-war-connection/2. Accessed: 21.9.2025.

³¹ Coen, Stephanie. "Interview with Steve Tesich: the only kind of real rebel left, he figures, is a moral person." *American Theatre* 9, no. 4 (1992): 34.

a “sweet, quiet optimism” in it, while George Roy Hill praises the film for eliminating any trace of “sharp negativity.”³² While Danilo’s scars will remain deep, he is poised to emerge from the sixties as a fundamentally resilient and well-rounded individual.³³

Danilo’s decision to enter the steel mill marks a radical attempt to re-integrate into the working class, emphasized by Tesich through the symbolic act of baptism amidst the blazing furnaces. The class divide in the film circles back to the beginning, and Danilo returns to his native community, where workers speak Serbian, locals dance the kolo, and he plays the flute in harmony with the local musicians. He finds peace with Vera, a girl from Yugoslavia, representing a rational attempt to reconnect with his roots. However, the escape from his American heritage for both Danilo and young Tesich represents an escape from themselves. Thus, Vera, despite all her virtues, cannot compete with Georgia. Yugoslavia will never evoke in Danilo the emotions he feels for America, as the sheltered immigrant community cannot compare to the untold allure of the American landscape. The separation from Vera, therefore, does not come as a dramatic break but feels like a natural progression of events. In keeping with Tesich’s desire, the scene of parting with Vera was filmed in a cemetery where his father is buried, symbolizing his personal farewell to his ancestral culture.

Danilo makes a conscious break with his past and sets fire to the chest from Yugoslavia, resolute that his quest for identity has finally come to an end. He is now an American, yet he continues to play the flute, a gesture signifying his determination to remain tethered to his roots. “Throughout the film, we see that remaining an idealist is no easy feat, but my character emerges from it with his ideals intact, which I believe mirrors my own experience,” Tesich explains.³⁴ The audience is presented with a conventional Hollywood ending in which the virtuous young man wins the woman of his dreams. However, given the weight of past experiences, the future of their relationship remains uncertain. As in *Breaking Away*, *Four Friends* offers a sense of closure with a triumphant resolution and a reaffirmation of community, yet pivotal dialogues throughout the film suggest the fleeting nature of this happy outcome. Both films construct an

³² Cohen, Barney. “Steve Tesich Turns Memories into Movies”: 46.

³³ Tesich’s refusal to surrender entirely to cynicism reflects a moral sensibility akin to what Albert Camus calls “the invincible summer” of human dignity — a faith in meaning that endures even within absurdity. See Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. New York, 1955: 121.

³⁴ Amata, Carmine. “Penn/Tesich/Georgia’s Friends”: 23.

image of America, deeply fractured by class divisions. Just as we are left questioning the fate of Dave's friends, we are equally reluctant to believe in a long-lasting happiness for Danilo and Georgia. Even Penn himself expressed doubt about the conclusion: "I wouldn't say the ending is right. I wouldn't say he really gets Georgia."³⁵

The parallel ideological layer of the film addresses the subordinate position of workers in immigrant neighborhoods, illustrating Tesich's argument that immigrants in America constitute a class unto themselves. Patriarchal figures like Danilo's father embody the entrenched immigrant mentality that refuses to engage with the society they live in. The tension between Danilo's pursuit of the American Dream and his father's unwavering resistance to integration is marked by violence, frustration, and misunderstanding, driven in part by the pressure Tesich himself experienced from his own father to find work in a local factory. However, the screenplay also highlights moments of deep empathy between father and son. While the father sees Danilo's ideals as a mockery of his own life, his underlying motivation becomes evident when he says, "I'm tired, but I have to go to work. That's America."

Departing from his personal history, Tesich places Danilo's parents on a ship back to Yugoslavia at the film's resolution. As in the farewell with Vera, "Tamo Daleko" reappears in a new variation, and the parents sail toward their homeland, leaving behind their Americanized son. This scene symbolizes yet another irrevocable farewell to the homeland, while also acting as a moment of much-needed generational reconciliation. By providing Danilo with peace in his relationships with both his father and Georgia, Tesich embeds the concept of "inherent forgiveness" as a central motif in his narrative, a theme that Penn also identifies in *Four Friends*.³⁶

From Eyewitness to Eleni: Genre Experimentation, Ideological Ambivalence, and the Ethics of Representation

Tesich's remaining four completed screenplays reveal an author eager to experiment across a range of genres, within which, to varying degrees, he continues to explore variations on the theme of the American Dream. While occasionally demonstrating the sharp insight of a social

³⁵ Porton, Richard, Crowds, Gary. "The Importance of a Singular, Guiding Vision: An Interview with Arthur Penn." *Cineaste* 20, no. 2 (1993): 14.

³⁶ Shickel, Richard. "Arthur Penn." In *Arthur Penn: Interviews*: 187.

commentator, Tesich also reveals an increasing inclination toward expressions of patriotism, underscored by the omnipresent American flag.

The product of his subsequent collaboration with Peter Yates was *Eyewitness*, a Hitchcockian thriller centered on two Vietnam War veterans caught in the paradoxical situation of being employed by a Vietnamese criminal who amassed his fortune on the Saigon black market and now presents himself as a successful capitalist in New York. Aldo, frustrated by the humiliation of his position, contrasts with the resigned Daryl, who refuses to view himself as part of a marginalized social group until class barriers prevent him from pursuing a romantic relationship. Tesich infuses the film with allusions to Vietnam to emphasize the complexity of the issue of social integration for war veterans, suggesting that the United States is unable to absorb its own citizens and reintegrate them as functional members of society. In contrast, a subplot portrays America as a country with an open heart, willing to offer refuge to Jews fleeing the Soviet Union, a moment typical of Cold War-era Hollywood cinema.

The World According to Garp, directed by George Roy Hill, is a charming film that was particularly dear to Tesich and played a pivotal role in the careers of Robin Williams and Glenn Close. As a highly stylized adaptation, its fairy-tale hero is thrust into a relentlessly realistic world where he leaves an indelible mark with little effort. *The World According to Garp*, along with *Welcome to the Jungle*, can be conceptually viewed as a precursor to *Forrest Gump* (1994). Tesich's screenplay presents America through the lens of contemporary feminist movements, attempting to bring their positions closer to a wider audience, while also satirizing the extremism found in both liberal and reactionary groups. However, Tesich's adaptation of Irving's novel demonstrates a certain lack of sensitivity toward gender issues, which prompted sharp criticism from several film critics, including Pauline Kael and John Hartzog. Hartzog, noting that "lust, rape, new relationships between men and women, new definitions of fatherhood and masculinity" are central to the novel but absent from the screenplay³⁷, accuses Tesich of returning the liberal text to a conservative domain by re-establishing the patriarchal order that Irving's book seeks to dismantle. Pointing to the actions by which the screenplay constructs Garp's patriarchal authority through a tendentious revision of characters from the source text, Hartzog concludes that the

³⁷ Hartzog, John Tomas. "The World According to Garp by George Roy Hill." *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1983): 39.

filmmakers succeeded in a singular endeavor: “castrating the feminist novel.”³⁸

The financial failure of Tesich’s last two films marked the quiet and unceremonious end of his screenwriting career. Filmed during the height of the Cold War, *Race for Life* represents a blatant glorification of the rebellious American spirit, which insidiously uses sport as a platform to demonstrate the superiority of American technology. Tesich conceived *Race for Life* as a western on bicycles, a modern ode to the vast expanses of the Midwest and the ever-relevant, merciless struggle between defenders of American virtue, those who threaten to tarnish it, and the elusive foreign factor. In the clash of three ideological positions, Tesich’s protagonist’s direct adversary is an American cyclist, nicknamed “Cannibal,” subtly leading the audience to recognize in him the shameful deviation of the national sporting spirit. In place of absent Native Americans, the Soviet team fills the role of the foreign factor.

In addressing the regressive aspects of its own national identity, the film asserts that the true embodiment of American valor and heroism is not Cannibal, but rather the young hopeful who adheres to the codes of sportsmanship. In resolving the conflict with the tacit adversary, the film explicitly reinforces the impression that Soviet dominance at the Moscow Olympics was primarily a consequence of the absence of American athletes. By sheer coincidence, the leader of the Soviet team is named Sergei Belov. To eliminate any possibility that the audience might, even momentarily, forget that he is a Soviet competitor, the commentator enthusiastically repeats this exotic detail ad infinitum. Unlike the real-life basketball player Belov, who had to settle for bronze in Moscow, Tesich’s Belov is the reigning Olympic champion. However, in the face-off against the American athletes, he is utterly humiliated, lagging far behind them, gasping for breath as if in the throes of death.

Eleni is equally ideologically problematic, though in this case, the Cold War antagonisms are transposed onto the European continent, finding fertile ground in the legacy of World War II. Tesich’s third collaboration with Yates utilizes the Greek Civil War of the late 1940s as a battleground for the contemporary Soviet-American struggle for global dominance. In Tesich’s adaptation of Nicholas Gage’s memoir, Greek monarchists and communists become mere proxies for the great powers backing them. Without delving too deeply into the political intricacies of

³⁸ Ibid.: 44.

the conflict or the cultural complexities of the region, *Eleni* portrays the partisans as a janissary-like faction of self-proclaimed saviors who, in reality, serve as the greatest oppressors of their own people — thereby implicitly elevating the royalists, in alliance with the Western powers, to the status of genuine liberators.

As a result, the film was largely perceived in Greece as a right-wing diatribe that distorts historical roles. The central conflict between the protagonist, Eleni, and the ruthless communist leader is framed as a battle between a “royalist Madonna and a communist Satan, supported by saints and demons on both sides.”³⁹ Condemned to ruin and fearful for her children’s future, Eleni desperately seeks to send them to America, envisioned as a land of salvation. However, in explaining to her son why this endeavor is not straightforward, she remarks: “We must have an invitation. America is a country where, when you arrive, they ask you: ‘Who invited you?’ Like at a wedding.” Curiously, the film resonated with none other than Ronald Reagan, who in 1987 cited *Eleni* as an impetus for his decision to sign the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Gorbachev.

If there is validity to the broad generalization that European cinema prioritizes character over narrative, while American cinema is primarily driven by plot, then the screenplays of Steve Tesich reveal an intricate synthesis of both traditions. As a writer of European descent, steeped in the Russian literary tradition as well as classical Hollywood storytelling, Tesich consciously aligns his work with the notion of cinema as entertainment. At the same time, however, he constructs richly detailed character studies and dialogues that often possess a literary quality surpassing what mainstream audiences typically encounter on screen. A frequent criticism of his work was precisely this emphasis on character development at the expense of plot, which led to films that sometimes felt like a sequence of meticulously crafted vignettes rather than a cohesive dramatic arc.

Lacking a conventionally structured narrative to propel the story forward, the episodic nature of his scripts occasionally undermines their dramatic unity. Tesich explicitly distanced himself from traditional notions of plot, asserting that

life does not unfold in neatly structured narratives. None of us experience life as a linear sequence of events progressing step by step.

³⁹ Georgakas, Dan. “Eleni.” *Cineaste* 14, no. 4 (1986): 50.

<...> I strive for honesty in my writing by portraying life as it truly is [Earley 1981: 27].

Kurt Vonnegut, however, might have countered with his own trenchant observation: “I do not champion plot as a perfect reflection of reality, but rather as a means of sustaining the reader’s attention.⁴⁰” Tesich, by contrast, remained steadfast in his conviction that

if you create genuine characters, endow them with authentic perspectives, place them in opposition to one another, and attentively follow the minutiae of their actions, drama will inevitably emerge.⁴¹

From his perspective, the tension found in Hollywood blockbusters is an artificial construct, one that he rejects precisely because it relies on shallow characterization.

In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, there is not a single real human being. Oddly enough, no one seems to mind. In fact, audiences are exhilarated by it. But these are all characters recycled from other films, existing solely to utter lines and perform actions that push the plot forward.⁴²

In contrast to the conventional approach of mainstream commercial cinema, where the emphasis lies in action, Tesich insists that his narratives must be rooted in character development: “In my films, if you fail to connect with the characters, the plot simply will not work. I do not want to write films where the dialogue could be interchangeable” [Earley 1981: 26]. Accordingly, he avoids archetypal or formulaic characters, instead striving for psychological depth and individuality. His dialogue, often charged with tension and unease, bears a distinctly theatrical quality rather than conforming to cinematic conventions. Unlike films that reduce dialogue to a mere instrument for advancing the plot, Tesich constructs meaning through conversation itself. As his Hollywood career progressed, it became increasingly evident that his sensibility was that of a serious dramatist — one whose full creative potential was yet to be realized in his later, more mature works.

⁴⁰ Vonnegut, Kurt. *Palm Sunday*. New York, 1999: 99.

⁴¹ Cohen, Barney. “Steve Tesich Turns Memories into Movies”: 46.

⁴² Ibid.: 42.

Within a cultural landscape shaped by the commercialization of artistic production, the entertainment industry has positioned itself as a crucial agent of socialization, a mediator of political reality, and a stabilizing force within liberal capitalism. Rather than fostering new models of social transformation, its function is to suppress them, reinforcing conformity to dominant cultural paradigms. In this context, Tesich's cinematic oeuvre can be interpreted both as a critique and as an affirmation of the American Dream. Creating at a time when cinematic authorship, after a brief resurgence, was once again being subsumed under corporate control, Tesich — despite occasionally advancing contentious ideological position — managed to preserve his artistic integrity and infuse his work with a measure of subversive content.

Tesich's legacy will, for the foreseeable future, remain primarily associated with his contributions to cinema, as reflected in *The New York Times*' commemorative piece, which honors him as the author of "popular films and not-so-popular plays."⁴³ However, the essence of his ethical and aesthetic vision is best sought in his dramatic oeuvre, which rightly commands the most attention in scholarly discourse. Written during a period of political maturation and professional aspiration, Tesich's screenplays were shaped by the constraints of the studio system — products of negotiation between artistic vision, market imperatives, producer demands, and directorial interpretations.

Unlike the unrestrained political engagement evident in his plays, Tesich's screenwriting is more tempered and palatable, requiring a deeper reading to uncover its subversive undercurrents beneath an ostensibly benign surface. In an industry where a film project must prove its viability as an investment and gain approval from corporate financiers, Tesich managed to carve out a remarkable degree of creative autonomy within rigid structures, giving voice to the communities from which he emerged. He worked in an era marked by towering cinematic auteurs, and while his imprint on film history may not be profoundly deep, it remains globally recognizable — a fact that, within the context of Serbian cultural heritage, warrants serious academic attention.⁴⁴

⁴³ Weber, Bruce. "Steve Tesich, 53, Whose Plays Plumbed the Nation's Identity." *New York Times*. July 2, 1996. www.nytimes.com/1996/07/02/arts/steve-tesich-53-whose-plays-plumbed-the-nation-s-identity.html. Accessed: 22.9.2025.

⁴⁴ Tesich's work exemplifies what Theodor Adorno described as the "autonomy of art" — a form of resistance that, precisely through its distance from the instrumental world, gestures toward utopia. In remaining within Hollywood's machinery while

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subtly subverting its logic, Tesich reclaims the artist’s ethical task: to make visible the humanity that ideology conceals. See Adorno, W. Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. London, 1997: 225–228.