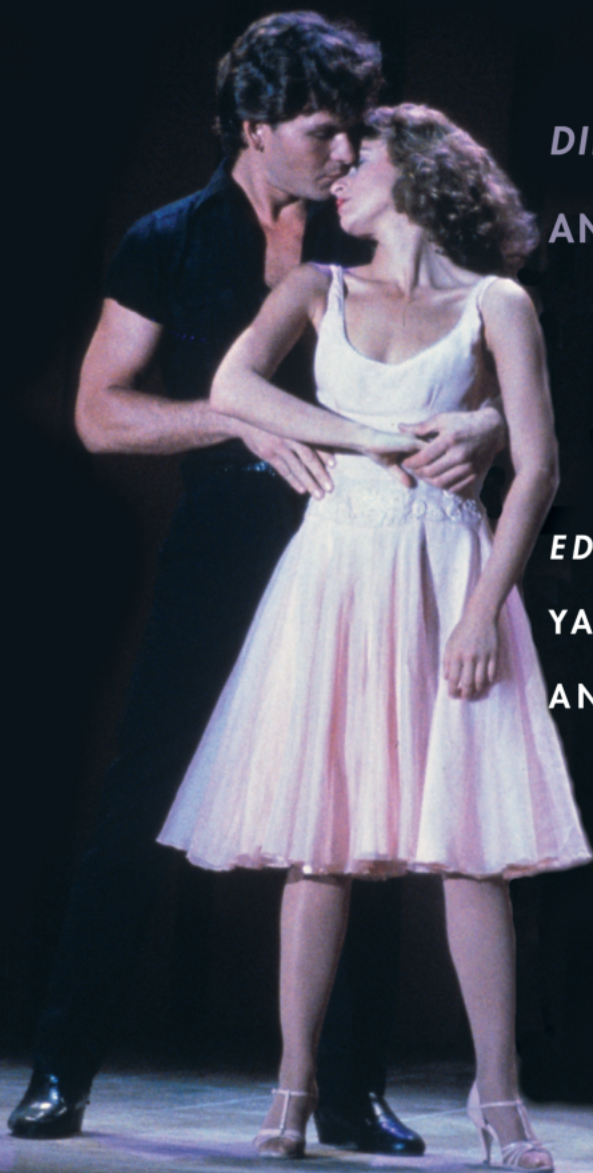


THE TIME *of* *OUR LIVES*

DIRTY DANCING
AND POPULAR CULTURE

EDITED by
YANNIS TZIOUMAKIS
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The Time of Our Lives

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WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS DETROIT

5 ***DIRTY DANCING* AS REAGAN-ERA CINEMA AND "REAGANITE ENTERTAINMENT"**

CYNTHIA BARON AND MARK BERNARD

Dirty Dancing ends, of course, with a scene that signifies perfect bliss: Cordoned off from the problems of daily life and surrounded by people of all ages dancing together, the young couple at the center of the dance floor celebrates. Their relationship has been blessed by the girl's morally perfect, all-knowing father. As the film tells us, nothing could be better; in fact, it *insists* that nothing could be better. Chillingly, it plays on our recognition that this movie moment offers the kind of comfort and satisfaction that is missing from ordinary life. Trained into patterns of viewing shaped by Hollywood convention, we bliss out at the sight of the happy couple. We also ignore a host of lingering problems, among them the persistent asymmetry in the couple's relationship. When Johnny (Patrick Swayze) lifts Baby (Jennifer Grey) into the air and brings her down in a close embrace, we read the gesture as a sign of adoration, not subservience. We see her coy smiles and his lip-synching to the anachronistic song "(I've Had) The Time of My Life" as a display of courtship rituals, not as a sign of his continued deference to her superior class status.

Taken on its own, *Dirty Dancing* keeps our attention focused on the pleasures promised by fictional worlds. However, when one considers it in relation to other 1970s and 1980s films that explore working-class characters' desire for class mobility, *Dirty Dancing* illuminates aspects of Reagan-era cinema and "Reaganite Entertainment" that warrant

additional discussion.¹ The film reflects the dominant values of its production context *and* more broad-based developments in what Andrew Britton saw as “Reaganite entertainment.”² This chapter discusses *Dirty Dancing* as a product of the Reagan era and as a film that illustrates how Reaganite entertainment uses threadbare formulas to satiate audiences whose interpretations emerge from their familiarity with Hollywood conventions. Many of these narrative patterns were developed in accordance with Hollywood’s “industry policy.” Conceived by Will Hays and Joseph Breen, “industry policy” blocks depictions that criticize the free market system, show collective action in a positive light, or treat racism, poverty, or unemployment in realistic ways. Like other examples of Reaganite entertainment, *Dirty Dancing* reveals the degree to which Hollywood’s industry policy has shaped American cinema and its audiences.

Looking at the Narrative through the Lens of the Working-Class Character

With Frances “Baby” Houseman serving as what Gérard Genette would call the “voice” of the film—the central character who takes us through the story and conveys its point of view—*Dirty Dancing* is akin to films like *Moonstruck* (Norman Jewison, 1987) and *Working Girl* (Mike Nichols, 1988). At the same time, if we turn our attention to Johnny Castle, the young entertainment staff employee hired to give “dance lessons” to wealthy matrons at Kellerman’s resort, it is possible to get a glimpse into what Genette would term the film’s underlying “mood.” As such, Johnny embodies the contradictions one finds in Hollywood narratives about working-class characters invested in class mobility.³ Johnny’s intense desire to win the approval of Baby’s father and be “the kind of person” Baby is places *Dirty Dancing* on common ground with dance musicals like *Flashdance* (Adrian Lyne, 1983) and *Staying Alive* (Sylvester Stallone, 1983) and youth working-class films of the Eighties like *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985) and *Pretty in Pink* (Howard Deutch, 1986).⁴

Of course, the film’s parallels are not limited to other 1980s films. *Dirty Dancing* draws on classical Hollywood conventions. As main characters in a dance musical, Baby and Johnny are expected to be

figures in a narrative that "conflates the formation of the couple with their transcendence of their class and gender differences."⁵ Similarly, because the film is produced by an industrial system that codified its promotion of consumer culture in the 1920s, Hollywood's audiences know that style and fashion will be the vehicles for the working-class character's efforts to transcend his social position.

There are, however, key aspects of *Dirty Dancing* that make it a distinctly Reagan-era product. Class differences are not the only source of problems in the relationship between Baby and Johnny; the film repeatedly presents us with scenes that highlight Johnny's extreme self-loathing for being someone who comes "from the streets" and whose only chance for full-time employment is to use his uncle's connection to get into the "House Painters and Plasters Union, Local 179." Those anti-union and anti-working-class sentiments are integral features of the Reagan era. Reagan's presidency represented "the first time since the 1920s [that] direct attacks on labor emanated from the White House" and a period when unions "were deliberately made the scapegoat of an economy that increasingly seemed unable to perform acceptably at home or abroad."⁶

Thus, the Reagan era led not only to a film like *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986) that glamorized militarism; it also led to a film like *Dirty Dancing* that used the conventions of the musical to envelop young, downwardly mobile (male) audiences in the fantasy of class transcendence through style and leisure activities, including ballroom dancing. That fantasy would have been especially attractive, of course, during Reagan's administration, which was an era of high unemployment, inflation, and escalating "middle-class" poverty. Manufacturing jobs were being replaced with service positions, and wealth was becoming "increasingly divided up amongst a smaller and smaller group of white professionals."⁷ *Top Gun* might have hailed Reagan-era audiences as supporters of "aggressive military interventions" and as "highly competitive young people [able] to spur the economy to new entrepreneurial heights."⁸ However, *Dirty Dancing* served as a strong reminder to middle- and working-class audiences that, in Reagan's America, people in the upper-class were to be seen as "higher beings who deserve more."⁹ Thus, a working-class person could, as Johnny understood, "never do anything" as valuable as a man like Dr. Houseman (Jerry Orbach).

***Dirty Dancing* as Reagan-era Cinema**

In another time, Johnny Castle and his dance partner Penny Johnson (Cynthia Rhodes) might have been presented as heirs to the legendary dance couple Vernon and Irene Castle. The Castles were international stars of the 1910s whose routines legitimized close dancing and popularized African-American jazz and ragtime music. Vernon and Irene Castle, during the brief time before Vernon was killed in a military plane crash in 1918, were known not only as performers, but also as dance instructors for the wealthy. Yet in this 1980s film, Johnny Castle is merely an object of fantasy for the young princess and a service provider for bungalow bunnies like Vivian Pressman (Miranda Garrison). In Reagan-era cinema, if you are not top gun, you are nothing.

Early on, we learn that the waiters at Kellerman's resort, who are on hiatus from classes at Ivy League schools, are encouraged to show the young guests a good time. By comparison, the entertainment staff "kids" exist in a separate caste. Like "Kellerman's own" Tito Suarez (portrayed by revered tap-dancing star Charles Honi Coles) and the African-American band members, they will be fired if they cross the color/class line by becoming intimate with any young guests. Moreover, in all the scenes set in Johnny's room, where the conventional focus of interest is the romantic coupling, it becomes clear that Johnny has thoroughly internalized the Reagan era's division between upper and lower castes. For instance, when Johnny contrasts himself with Dr. Houseman, who has saved the lives of Penny and, earlier, Max Kellerman (Jack Weston), he tells Baby: "the reason people treat me like I'm nothin' is because I'm nothin'."

Like the central working-class characters in *Rocky* (John Avildsen, 1976) and *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977), Johnny's sense of worthlessness causes him to expend intense physical labor. While dance is a way for him to break out of the "cultural circle of class oppression," it is important to note that dance is itself a form of manual labor; moreover, the discipline required to succeed as a dancer and dance instructor "is also an internalization of guilt" over his working-class status.¹⁰ Capturing the sentiment behind the extreme effort and self-discipline exhibited by the era's working-class athletes and dancers, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner explain that this is "a way of

telling oneself it is one's own fault and that one should work hard to overcome one's own failure and succeed." "Class guilt," they continue, "is thus individualized, and [so] the effort to overcome structural inequality is conceived in individual rather than collective terms."¹¹

Guilt for being working class makes little sense as a distinguishing trait for a young male character in a story set in 1963 when the economic futures of ordinary Americans looked bright. However, it is decidedly appropriate for a character in a Reagan-era film, considering the downturn in jobs and the changing attitudes toward labor taking place at the time. While "the proportion of net new employment that paid middle-level earning to male workers [was] 78 percent between 1963 and 1973," by 1986, the proportion of new, decently paying positions for (young) men had fallen to 26 percent.¹² Additionally, "beginning in 1978, and increasingly after the election of Ronald Reagan . . . Washington began to adopt policies that effectively forced workers to accept wage concessions, discredited the trade-union movement, and reduced the cost to business of complying with government regulations."¹³ Thus, while the upper-class characters in *Dirty Dancing* might be suited to the 1963 setting as they touch on America's looming cultural competition (near the end of the film, Max Kellerman expands on Baby's opening reference to 1963 as a time "before the Beatles came" by lamenting young Americans' growing interest in traveling to Europe), Johnny's anxiety and humiliation over being in the precarious situation of being a working-class youth reflects the film's Reagan-era production context.

Johnny's view that he was "balancing on shit" is indicative of American workers' sense of helplessness during the Reagan years. While one needs to avoid "a creeping industrial nostalgia" and recognize that manufacturing jobs in the postwar years represented "tough work that people did because it paid well and it was located in their communities," changes in the workplace meant that by 1982 "more than one out of ten Americans [were] unemployed."¹⁴ Given the "across-the-board U-turn in managerial, economic, and social policy" that began in the 1970s and was motivated by companies' interest in expanding their profits, a seasonal employee like a dance instructor would be especially insecure financially (and psychologically). In Reagan's America, 80 percent of part-time workers earned less than the salary established as the "low-wage cut-off" for full-time workers.¹⁵

Economists have determined that the US could have met the challenges of international competition through innovation “in products and processes,” but instead companies focused on reducing the cost of labor and thus caused “heightened competition at home” among workers.¹⁶ With the government and management focused on cutting the cost of labor, individuals were consistently blamed for the country’s economic problems. Cited as key factors in the downturn were “the decline in the work ethic in the United States, the erosion of public morality, or the collective failure to save and invest.”¹⁷ President Reagan identified workers as the cause of unemployment and told the country that “there were jobs for those who wanted them.”¹⁸ As Johnny exemplifies, American workers “internalized views” that served business interests; they accepted “a perception of themselves . . . detrimental to their own interest.”¹⁹ Having been fired for crossing the class boundary and with no prospect of work in his future, Johnny will still “never be sorry.” By being Baby’s dance instructor, he has gotten a glimpse of what it would be like to be something other than working-class. If *Dirty Dancing* had followed the logic implicit



The final image of *Dirty Dancing*—if it were not a product of Reaganite entertainment.

in its imagery, it would have opened with Baby in the backseat of her father's 1963 Oldsmobile sedan and ended with Johnny driving away in his 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air coupe. But it does not end there. As an example of Reaganite entertainment, the film must return us to the safe confines of the ballroom.

Britton's Vision of "Reaganite Entertainment"

Dirty Dancing belongs to the Reagan era because it depicts and never questions the working-class character's "feelings of guilt at not having made it, of having failed as an individual."²⁰ Yet the film's thematic concerns, narrative design, and audience address also make it emblematic of "Reaganite entertainment," a term Andrew Britton coined in his polemical 1986 essay "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment." *Dirty Dancing* explicitly exemplifies the phenomenon's key components. In some cases, it does so indirectly. For instance, Britton identifies nuclear anxiety as the source of Reaganite entertainment's central motif of helplessness. In *Dirty Dancing*, the characters' feelings of helplessness arise from anxiety about job insecurity and the barriers to American working-class success.

For Britton, 1980s films' "highly ritualized and formulaic character" is "the most striking feature" of Reaganite entertainment.²¹ According to Britton, studio-era audiences went to the movies to see how films might deviate from a particular set of conventions. Thus, the greatest successes of classical Hollywood cinema were the productions that presented "significant variation, inflection, and development."²² By comparison, Reaganite entertainment features repetition and sameness. Its films are successful insofar as they replicate what has come before and meet, not challenge, audiences' expectations.

As Britton explains, the "ritualized repetitiveness of Reaganite entertainment" not only gives audiences what they want (over and over again) but also carves out a privileged, discursive space for "entertainment," which is praised for "its delirious, self-celebrating . . . interminable solipsism."²³ These movies tell "us that we are being entertained . . . that we are 'off duty' and that nothing is required of us but to sit back, relax, and enjoy."²⁴ The demarcation between the world of the movie (entertainment) and the realm of work outside the movie (reality) is important. Reaganite entertainment "defines itself in

opposition to labor” and hails audiences as “off-duty” in several senses of the word.²⁵ Viewers are encouraged to “not work” in that they are told not to analyze the film’s content too closely; after all, it is “just entertainment.” At the same time, Reaganite entertainment presents the outside world as “profoundly unsatisfying”; entertainment is the only source of pleasure available to people who are assured that their pleasure will continue as long as they remain “off-duty” and uncritical of the ecstasies offered by the films.²⁶

The distance between “entertainment” and “reality” that Reaganite entertainment creates discourages audiences from attempting to change the world or find pleasure outside the movies. It is fine for audiences to seek pleasure at the movies, but that pleasure-seeking must be delimited to the world of entertainment and sought nowhere else. In this sense, Reaganite entertainment offers what Britton calls a “negative utopia”—with “utopian” and “idealistic” categorized as “unrealistic” and “impracticable.”²⁷ The premise is that real change in the real world is impossible, so there is no point in attempting to pursue satisfaction outside the realm of Hollywood movies. Reaganite entertainment makes the pursuit of pleasure in the real world seem illogical: Why would a person try to find satisfaction out there when it is so readily at hand in the movies? The more audiences enjoy the pleasures of Reaganite entertainment, the less they search for satisfaction in the outside world; it thus effectively discourages people from interrogating dominant ideology and structures of power.

Reaganite entertainment films promise unlimited pleasure, bliss, and euphoria. Yet they acknowledge that it is impossible to find lasting satisfaction in the real world. This creates a built-in displeasure that leads into the films’ reliance on repetition. As Britton explains, because the films “continually reproduce the terms of ‘the world as it is’ while also a yearning for something different,” audiences are compelled to “go back to them again and again.”²⁸ Repetition is thus a key aspect of the films, which satisfy audiences by repeating what has been seen in other movies and by featuring “feel-good” stories that audiences want to watch over and over (not surprisingly, Reaganite entertainment is the ideal product for the VHS, DVD, and streaming video eras).

To ensure that audiences will come back to these movies again and again, Reaganite entertainment aims to maximize pleasure, and so

the stories are structured to ensure a distinct lack of conflict. There is a modicum of dramatic conflict, but only on the most superficial level. Exploring this lack of dialectic in Reaganite entertainment, Britton contrasts the films to earlier utopian works of literature in which "contraries are not willed away, for the concrete nature of the authentic utopia . . . depends on its including and accounting for its contradiction."²⁹ Britton attacks Reaganite entertainment's lack of serious dramatic conflict by citing William Blake's oft-quoted maxim that "without contraries is no progression."³⁰ In other words, a narrative presents a utopian vision, one that involves a positive re-making of the real world, only when "the imagery of the world transformed [is] dramatized in relation to the forces that act against [it]."³¹ When weight is not given to opposing forces, a narrative offers escape rather than an idealized vision of the future.

This lack of contraries in Reaganite entertainment sets it apart from classical Hollywood films wherein the "ironic happy ending [makes] visible the ideological obligations that constrain the text by creating a felt contradiction between the dynamic of an actual narrative and the inertness of its resolution."³² Conversely, in Reaganite entertainment, contraries are willed away, the thesis has no antithesis, and there is no synthesis. The films do not risk creating the dissonance of "ironic happy endings"; it is much safer to erase conflicts and maximize "pure entertainment" free from the drudgery of immutable and overwhelming real life.

Like Britton, Robin Wood highlights the fact that Reaganite entertainment addresses its audience as children (who are, typically, off-duty). As Wood writes: "The success of [Reaganite] films is only comprehensible when one assumes a widespread *desire* for regression to infantilism, a populace who wants to be constructed as mock children."³³ Accordingly, Reaganite entertainment seeks to set the minds of these audiences at ease in the face of the turmoil that the patriarchal family had, as Wood emphasizes, suffered at the hands of the radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Wood and Britton point out that Reaganite entertainment consistently works to reinstate the power of the father because this symbolic figure had been so often challenged by the counterculture. That effort also reflects the decline in high-paying manufacturing jobs and the films' reliance on repetition and predictability.

Summarizing his arguments, Britton proposes that patriarchy is “what gets reaffirmed in Reaganite entertainment: With unrelenting insistence and stridency, it is the status and function of the father and [his] inheritance by the son that are at stake.”³⁴ The films take great pains to reestablish the father as head of both the family and society. Even if, as Britton explains, the father seems at first “exploitative and reactionary,” the audience learns—usually via a “melodramatic ‘change of heart’”—that the father is “lovable and admirable after all.”³⁵ Thus, the restoration of the father is a cornerstone of Reaganite entertainment and a key component of its ultimate mission to convince its infantilized audience to, as Wood puts it, “trust Father.”³⁶

***Dirty Dancing* as Reaganite Entertainment**

Dirty Dancing opens with Baby telling us that she never thought she would find a guy as great as her dad. Dr. Houseman is implicitly identified as “the man of your dreams” when Penny selects him as her partner in the first dance class (and Baby gets paired with old Mrs. Schumacher). Dr. Houseman also has the last line of dialog in the film—“you looked wonderful out there [on the dance floor]”—and, except for the scene of couples on the dance floor, he is the character who holds Baby in his arms at the end of the movie. *Dirty Dancing* thus establishes Dr. Houseman as the film’s father figure and model character. He provides the seal of approval not only for Johnny becoming Baby’s “dance partner” but also for the film’s overarching theme that “entertainment offers satisfaction that life does not.”³⁷ The film can end once Dr. Houseman blesses Baby’s desire to find meaning not from work in the Peace Corps, but instead from following her partner’s lead on the dance floor, something she can do over and over again. Emblematic of Reaganite entertainment, Dr. Houseman is so powerful that he magically saves Penny’s life after a botched abortion (we never see him labor as a doctor). When Johnny dreams about the woman he loves, the approval of her father is the salient piece. As he tells Baby, “[in the dream] we were walking along and we met your father and he said come on and he put his arm around me, just like he did with Robbie [an upper-class kid at the camp].” For the children, Baby and Johnny, getting the father’s approval is both necessary and sufficient.

With the world of *Dirty Dancing* confined to the idyllic resort, the film can, as Robin Wood might observe, "paper the cracks" created by its demeaning representation of the working-class member of the couple. With our view limited to the lush green world of Kellerman's Mountain House (except for the brief appearance of Baby and Johnny on a dance floor outside the resort), the film muffles Johnny's plaintive cry that "people treat me like nothin' because I'm nothin'" with his final announcement to the audience in the ballroom, "I always do the last dance of the season." As in a film like *Saturday Night Fever* and its emblematic Bee Gees song "Stayin' Alive," the passing nod to working-class pain as US business and government cut labor costs ("I've been kicked around since I was born") is negated by being followed with the "permission to forget" ("And now it's all right. It's OK. And you may look the other way").³⁸

In *Dirty Dancing*, characters' pain and conflict are muted in part by the pastoral setting. The film is marked by its absence of a dialectic, a journey, or any progression, for it begins and ends in paradise. While *Saturday Night Fever* "is unusually rich in a sense of ethnographic detail" and establishes "a set of oppositions between the fallen world [Brooklyn] and the redeemed world [Manhattan]," *Dirty Dancing* exemplifies Reaganite entertainment because it shows us a summer resort, a "hermetic, autonomous world which has no bearing" to an outside world.³⁹ Despite this contrast, both films find ways to reinforce the "ideal or figurative meaning" of their central metaphors; in *Saturday Night Fever*, the literal meaning of "the bridge as a means of conducting working people to the drudgery of another day on the job" is papered over by the idealized vision of it as representing "the transcendence of working-class life" and the possibility of "upward mobility."⁴⁰

The dance floor in *Dirty Dancing* is a place of servitude for a character like Johnny; he spends his "free time" inventing dance moves that will keep the guests happy and makes big money only when he gives private "dance lessons." However, this concept of the dance floor is papered over by the vision of the abstract, autonomous dance floor as a fantasy space that allows people to transcend the "bewilderingly problematic" adult world.⁴¹ It also allows them to set aside concerns about the challenges of upward mobility (for Johnny) and downward slide (for Baby). With both Baby and Johnny finding "surrogate

professional and personal gratification through dance,” Dr. Houseman’s final blessing of the children’s dance-floor coupling likely has little to do with supporting Johnny’s desire to transcend his working-class status.⁴² It is more concerned with condoning the business and government policies that would make it impossible for Baby to have a lifestyle comparable to his. Most importantly, Dr. Houseman’s blessing confirms the dance floor’s figurative meaning as a space where anyone can transcend the dissatisfaction of everyday life.

The film’s obvious resolution is indicative of Reaganite entertainment. Its predictability, which serves as a “main source of pleasure,” makes *Dirty Dancing* comparable to the films in the *Star Wars* (1977–1983) and *Rocky* (1976–1990) franchises that are, for Britton, examples of Reaganite entertainment because they are so clearly marked by predictability and because of their “ritualized and formulaic character.”⁴³ Having been trained to understand the conventions of Hollywood movies, and musicals in particular, audiences know that Johnny will return, that the lovers will be united, and that the film will end with a dance. Like other examples of Reaganite entertainment, the predictability of *Dirty Dancing* satisfies audiences’ desire both “to be constructed as children” and addressed as “sophisticated and ‘modern.’”⁴⁴ It uses “window dressing to conceal—but not entirely—the extreme familiarity of the plot, characterization, situation, and character relations.”⁴⁵

Dirty Dancing’s “active presentation of its conventions” not only invites viewers to become aware of them, it also celebrates “the spectator as the consumer of the spectacle.”⁴⁶ Its “banal repetitiveness of entertainment formulae [produces] a certain kind of complicity with the spectator, a knowing sense of familiarity with the terms of the discourse.”⁴⁷ Moreover, the film’s reliance on various types of repetition gives the narrative a predictability and coherence that flatters and thus pleases its audiences. The film begins and ends with scenes of “dirty dancing”; after Baby’s dance lessons, we often watch her repeat basic dance steps again and again; lines of dialog (“this is my dance space, this is your dance space”) from an early rehearsal scene are repeated in a later one; and the dance moves of the entertainment staff “kids” feature a limited number of recognizable variations. Even the scenes of Baby and Johnny dancing tend to involve repeated performances of the same dance routine, one that had been part of Johnny’s

and Penny's standard repertoire. At Kellerman's resort, the guests get regular announcements for upcoming activities, and when Baby and Johnny are in his room, the stack of 45 rpm records keeps music playing regularly in the background. Like the predictability of the larger narrative, these smaller pieces of *Dirty Dancing's* visual and aural repetition confirm that we are in the presence of entertainment "that tells us to forget our troubles and to get happy."⁴⁸

Reaganite Entertainment as an Effect of Hollywood's "Industry Policy"

As monstrous and insidious as the rise of Reaganite entertainment might have seemed to observers like Britton, this particular strain of cinema was not without precedent. Reaganite entertainment productions like *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982) might have differed significantly from films such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (Richard Brooks, 1977), *Cruising* (William Friedkin, 1980), and *Day of the Dead* (George Romero, 1985). Britton and Wood see these films as revealing the larger ideological crisis taking place in the United States caused by the Civil Rights movement, feminism, gay liberation, and other socio-economic challenges to white, capitalist patriarchy. Yet it is crucial to remember that the films celebrated by Wood and Britton, which also include *Reds* (Warren Beatty, 1981) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), were the exception, not the rule. Reaganite entertainment may very well have been a formal and thematic admixture that the Hollywood film industry had been working toward since 1908, when public debates about film content led to New York's movie theaters being shut down on Christmas Eve.⁴⁹ In terms of film narratives about the working class, Reaganite entertainment seems to be the trajectory toward which Hollywood cinema has been aiming since labor conflict developed in Hollywood in the 1910s. As Steven J. Ross illustrates, by the 1920s the "highly polemic[al] films that explored conflict between the classes [shifted] to far more conservative films that explored fantasies of love and harmony among the classes."⁵⁰

Britton himself, at the outset of his argument, explains that Reaganite entertainment should not be seen as directly tied to the policies

and person of Ronald Reagan, if only because films like *Rocky* and *Star Wars* began appearing before Reagan's inauguration in 1981. It could be argued that an embryonic version of Reaganite entertainment had taken shape even before 1934, when Joseph I. Breen took charge of Hollywood's Production Code Administration (PCA). From the beginning of his tenure, Breen, whose devout Catholicism (and rabid anti-Semitism) has been well documented, had a clear vision for removing sex and violence from Hollywood cinema. However, one aspect of the job that Breen did not immediately understand—and that Will Hays was quick to teach him—was the enforcement of what they called “industry policy.” This was the deliberately vague name given to “dealing with those films that, while technically within the moral confines of the code . . . were adjudged ‘dangerous’ to the well-being of the industry . . . because they dealt with politically sensitive topics.”⁵¹ Under industry policy, tantalizing stories with a modicum of sex and violence were fine for the Hollywood screen as long as they did not criticize capitalism and the free market, depict poverty or class inequality, or point to any systemic problems within “the American way of life.” For instance, a film like Warner Bros.' *Black Fury* (Michael Curtiz, 1935) may use labor unrest in the Pennsylvania coalmines as the backdrop for a hero's individual actions and specific struggles. However, the film's narrative must make no allusion to unionizing, and if it must, the unionizing must be presented as corrupt and/or unsuccessful.

It is little wonder, then, that the Hollywood film industry, under Breen's watchful eye, became the dreaded culture industry those in the Frankfurt School, like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, famously decried.⁵² Industry policy and the allegiance to capitalism it demanded ensured that no serious problems with labor or free markets would ever be made visible, much less addressed, in Hollywood films. As Adorno and Horkheimer would point out, Hollywood's audiences could come to believe that social and economic problems did not actually exist, as their vision of reality evolved to become “indistinguishable from [that of] the movies.”⁵³ If one takes *Dirty Dancing* as a touchstone, it is possible to see that Hollywood cinema's disavowal of social problems and its effacement of labor and class concerns reach full expression in Reaganite entertainment. Thus, rather than seeing it as emerging directly from the cultural zeitgeist of the late 1970s, Reaganite entertainment is perhaps better understood as the

culmination of years of material circumstances wrought by policy decisions made in Hollywood's executive offices.

That is not to say that Reaganite entertainment in the 1980s was no different from what came before. As suggested by the allusion to Adorno and Horkheimer, the film's vision of the contrast between cinema and reality is crucial. Earlier products of the culture industry might aim to erase the difference between the wonderful world depicted in the movies and the drudgery outside the movie theater. However, the crisis brought on by the cultural events in the 1960s and early 1970s and material developments of the late 1970s and 1980s disallowed any filmic gesture that suggested the world outside was anything like the movies. Working from this cynicism, Reaganite entertainment self-consciously acknowledges that the world outside is unsatisfying. It positions entertainment as the only source from which to draw pleasure and insists on the futility of seeking pleasure or attempting to change things in the real world.

Some Conclusions

Dirty Dancing is emblematic of Reaganite entertainment for many reasons. Released in August 1987, in the wake of the Tax Reform Act passed in October 1986 (which again reduced the taxes for top incomes and raised the rate on the lowest incomes), the Iran-Contra scandal that became visible in November 1986, the savings and loans bailouts that began in 1986, and just a few months before the stock market crash in October 1987, the film blithely tells the viewer to not worry about these troublesome events and instead escape into a Neverland structured by ritual and repetition. *Dirty Dancing's* insistence that we ignore problems in the outside world makes it the offspring of Will Hays and Joe Breen's industry policy. While the film ostensibly explores the social and economic differences that threaten the union of the couple, there is no class conflict because Johnny's beliefs and behaviors are in sync with Baby's and Dr. Houseman's from the beginning. In *Dirty Dancing*, disturbances and problems are magically resolved before they can ruin the fun. It is thus an apparatus that promises pleasure—if we all stay in the ballroom.

Reflecting its production context, *Dirty Dancing* places Johnny, the working-class dance instructor, in a hopeless and helpless situation.

While he might aspire to become Baby's "dance partner," his fixed, lower status makes him ill-suited to inherit Dr. Houseman's august place in the fairy-tale world. Revealing itself to be a distinctly Reagan-era film, *Dirty Dancing* shows that America's mutable class barriers had, in the 1980s, transformed into a caste system where dominant factions reasserted their position that a person's subservient (class and/or racial) identity could and should be determined by birth. Taking an analytic stance that both narrows and expands that focus, one can also see that *Dirty Dancing*'s use of Hollywood formulas places it squarely among the collection of films Andrew Britton saw as examples of Reaganite entertainment. *Dirty Dancing*'s narrative resolution is not ironic, like some films in classical Hollywood cinema, but instead insular and sugar-coated. Its entertainment and distraction value is so ephemeral that audiences find themselves returning again and again to this and/or other Reaganite entertainment films.

Dirty Dancing is thus not an anomaly, but one of many Hollywood media products that, increasingly, have prompted us to find our pleasure and satisfaction in the movies. Taking that idea one step further, the film and Reaganite entertainment as a whole need not be seen as aberrations, but are perhaps best understood as the result of the Hollywood industry's century-long position that references to "problems" in the outside world are not good for business. As such, *Dirty Dancing* is not simply a reflection of the Reagan era. Moreover, even Reaganite entertainment is not just a reflection of 1980s cultural and economic realities. Instead, *Dirty Dancing* and the many iterations of Reaganite entertainment exemplify the kind of motion picture product that eventually results from industrial practices designed to create wide markets for nondurable goods and thus ensure maximum profit for the private sector. *Dirty Dancing*'s incredible commercial success and its status as a platform for commercial remakes is a testament to Hollywood's unfailing ability to make its products desirable commodities.

Notes

- 1 For example, William Palmer's *The Films of the Eighties: A Social History* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), which covers Vietnam and nuclear war films, narratives about the Cold War, yuppie films, and the

- oxymoronic category of "neo-conservative feminist texts," does not mention *Dirty Dancing*. Doug Kellner's discussion of *Top Gun* as a "Reaganite wet dream" in *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern* (New York: Routledge, 1995) also characterizes Reagan-era cinema as distinguished by its invocation of "traditional values" and responses to the Cold War, and so does not discuss patterns in the films from the 1970s and 1980s that touch, in some way, on the lives of the millions of Americans who lost economic and social ground in the Reagan era.
- 2 Andrew Britton, "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment," in *Britton on Film: The Complete Criticism of Andrew Britton*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 97–154.
 - 3 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 161–262.
 - 4 Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 120.
 - 5 Chris Jordan, *Movies and the Reagan Presidency: Success and Ethics* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2003), 106.
 - 6 Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 15.
 - 7 Ryan and Kellner, *Camera Politica*, 301.
 - 8 Kellner, *Media Culture*, 75, 82
 - 9 Ryan and Kellner, *Camera Politica*, 116.
 - 10 *Ibid.*, 112.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, 112.
 - 12 Harrison and Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn*, 126.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, 14.
 - 14 Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, "Introduction: The Meanings of Deindustrialization," in *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*, eds. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 14, 15; Harrison and Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn*, 14.
 - 15 Harrison and Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn*, 7, 128.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, 24, 175. See also Robert B. Reich, *The Next Frontier* (New York: Times Books, 1983), 174; Ira C. Magaziner and Robert B. Reich, *Minding America's Business: The Decline and Rise of the American Economy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 4–5; Fredrick R. Strobel, *Upward Dreams, Downward Mobility: The Economic Decline of the American Middle Class* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), xiii; Barry Bluestone, "Foreword," in *Beyond the Ruins*, xi.
 - 17 Magaziner and Reich, *Minding America's Business*, 25.
 - 18 Kenneth Root, "Job Loss: Whose Fault, What Remedies?" in *Research in Politics and Society: Deindustrialization and the Restructuring of American Industry, Volume 3*, eds. Michael Wallace and Joyce Rothchild (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1988), 74.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, 76; See also Cowie and Heathcott, "Introduction," 1.
 - 20 Ryan and Kellner, *Camera Politica*, 119.
 - 21 Britton, "Blissing Out," 99.

- 22 Ibid., 99.
- 23 Ibid., 99.
- 24 Ibid., 100–101.
- 25 Ibid., 101.
- 26 Ibid., 101.
- 27 Ibid., 107.
- 28 Ibid., 110.
- 29 Ibid., 108.
- 30 Quoted in Ibid., 108
- 31 Ibid., 108.
- 32 Ibid., 105.
- 33 Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan . . . And Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 147. Britton did graduate work under Wood at Warwick University, and the pair became close colleagues. Wood would later call Britton “the major influence on all [his] subsequent work” in the preface to *Hitchcock’s Films Revisited*, revised edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), xxiii.
- 34 Britton, “Blissing Out,” 129.
- 35 Ibid., 130.
- 36 Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 155.
- 37 Britton, “Blissing Out,” 101.
- 38 Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 317.
- 39 Ryan and Kellner, *Camera Politica*, 113, 114; Britton, “Blissing Out,” 102.
- 40 Ryan and Kellner, *Camera Politica*, 116.
- 41 Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 156.
- 42 Ryan and Kellner, *Camera Politica*, 113.
- 43 Britton, “Blissing Out,” 98, 99.
- 44 Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 148.
- 45 Ibid., 148.
- 46 Britton, “Blissing Out,” 102, 106.
- 47 Ibid., 102.
- 48 Ibid., 101.
- 49 See Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 12–13.
- 50 Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), xiii.
- 51 Black, *Hollywood Censored*, 245.
- 52 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader* 2nd edition, ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1999), 31–41.
- 53 Ibid., 35.