Directed by Hal Ashby
Screenplay by Robert Towne
Based on the novel by Darryl Ponicsan
Produced by Gerald Ayres
Original Music by Johnny Mandel
Cinematography by Michael Chapman
Film Editing by Robert C. Jones


October 26, 2010 (XXI:9)
Hal Ashby, The Last Detail (1973, 103 min)

ROBERT C. JONES (8 March 1937) has edited 32 films, including 
Unconditional Love 2002, Bulworth 1998, City Hall 1996, 
The Babe 1992, Lookin’ to Get Out 1982, Heaven Can Wait 1978, 
Bound for Glory 1976, Shampoo 1975, The Last Detail 1973, Man of 
La Mancha 1972, The New Centurions 1972, Cisco Pike 1972, 
Toklas! 1968, Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner 1967, Tobruk 1967, 
Ship of Fools 1965, It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World 1963, and A 

JACK NICHOLSON (22 April 1937, Neptune, New Jersey) has 
appeared in 75 films and tv series, some of which were How Do 
You Know (2010), The Bucket List (2007), The Departed (2006), 
Something’s Gotta Give (2003), Anger Management (2003), About 
Schmidt (2002), The Pledge (2001), As Good as It Gets (1997), 
Few Good Men (1992), Man Trouble (1992), The Two Jakes 
The Witches of Eastwick (1987), Heartburn (1986), Elephant's 
Child (1986) (TV), Prizzi's Honor (1985), Terms of Endearment 
Postman Always Rings Twice (1981), The Shining (1980), Goin’ 
South (1978), The Last Tycoon (1976), The Missouri Breaks (1976), 
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975), The Fortune (1975), 
Tommy (1975), Professione: reporter/ The Passenger (1975), 
Chinatown (1974), The Last Detail (1973), The King of Marvin 
Gardens (1972), A Safe Place (1971), Carnal Knowledge (1971), 
Five Easy Pieces (1970), On a Clear Day You Can See Forever 
Psy-ch-Out (1968), Hells Angels on Wheels (1967), The Shooting 
(1967), "Dr. Kildare" (4 episodes, 1966), Ride in the Whirlwind 
(1965), Ensign Pulver (1964), The Terror (1963), The Raven 
(1963), Studs Lonigan (1960), The Wild Ride (1960), The Little 
Shop of Horrors (1960), Too Soon to Love (1960), and The Cry 

OTIS YOUNG (4 July 1932, Providence, Rhode Island—11 October 
2001, Los Angeles, California) was in 26 films and shows, 
including After Image 2001, "Hill Street Blues" 1985, The 
Capture of Bigfoot 1979, “Twin Detectives” 1976, "Cannon" 1976, 
Brother 1969, "The F.B.I." 1968, "Valley of Mystery" 1967, 

RANDY QUAIĐ (1 October 1950, Houston, Texas) has been in 115 
films. Some of them are: Balls Out: Gary the Tennis Coach 2009, 
Real Time 2008, Goya’s Ghosts 2006, Brokeback Mountain 2005, 
Grind 2003, Black Cadillac 2003, Not Another Teen Movie 2001, 
the Starving Class 1994, "Frankenstein" 1992, "Saturday Night 
Ride of the Dalton Gang" 1979, Midnight Express 1978, The 
Choirboys 1977, Bound for Glory 1976, The Missouri Breaks 1976, 
The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz 1974, The Last Detail 1973, 

CAROL KANE (18 June 1952, Cleveland, Ohio) has appeared in 124 
films and shows, including Should've Been Romeo 2011, My 
Girlfriend's Boyfriend 2010, The Bounty Hunter 2010, Kung Fu 
Panda: Secrets of the Furious Five 2008, Love in the Time of 
"Tales from the Crypt" 1990, Joe Versus the Volcano 1990, The 
Ishar 1987, Jumpin' Jack Flash 1986, Racing with the Moon 1984, 
When a Stranger Calls 1979, The Muppet Movie 1979, The World's 
Greatest Lover 1977, Valentino 1977, Annie Hall 1977, Harry and 
Walter Go to New York 1976, Hester Street 1975, Dog Day 
Afternoon 1975, The Last Detail 1973, Wedding in White 1972, 
Carnal Knowledge 1971, and Desperate Characters 1971.

MICHAEL MORIARTY (5 April 1941, Detroit, Michigan) has acted 
in 85 films and shows, some of which are The Yellow Wallpaper 
Upstream 2002, Along Came a Spider 2001, "The Outer Limits" 
Tower 1987, Pale Rider 1985, Q 1982, Who'll Stop the Rain 1978, 
Report to the Commissioner 1975, "The Glass Menagerie" 1973, 
The Last Detail 1973, Bang the Drum Slowly 1973, Hickey & Boggs 
1972, and My Old Man's Place 1971.

NANCY ALLEN (24 June 1950, New York City) has appeared in 42 
films and tv shows, some of which are My Apocalypse 2008, "Law 
& Order: Special Victims Unit" 2003, Children of the Corn 666: 
Isaac's Return 1999, Against the Law 1997, "Touched by an Angel" 
System 1984, "Faerie Tale Theatre" 1984, Blow Out 1981, Dressed 

Hal Ashby from World Film Directors, V. II, Ed. John 

The American director was born in Ogden, Utah, where his father 
ran a dairy. His date of birth is given variously as 1930, 1932, and 
1936. Ashby’s childhood was troubled and insecure. Almost every 
one in Ogden except his own family were Mormons, and his parents 
were not happy together. Ashby was confused and disturbed at the 
age of five or six by their divorce, and traumatized by his father’s 
suicide seven years later. He was surly at home and difficult at 
school, dropping out in his senior year.

According to Paul Fritze in Close-Up: The Contemporary 
Director, Ashby “drifted from job to job and woman to woman. He 
was married and divorced twice by the time he was twenty-one. In 
1953 he hitchhiked to Los Angeles. After he tried about fifty or 
sixty jobs—"You name it; I did it"—he ended up as a Multilith 
operator at the old Republic Pictures.”

One day, “running off ninety or so copies of some page 
14,” it occurred to him that he wanted to make films himself. 
Everyone assured him that “the best school for a director is in the 
cutting room” and after much persistence, he was taken on as an 
apprentice cutter. He believes that his advisers were correct—that
“when film comes into a cutting room, it holds all the work and efforts of everyone involved up to that point: the staging, writing, acting photography, sets, lighting, and sound. It is all there to be studied again and again, until you really know why it’s good, or why it isn’t.”

What Ashby found hardest was the union rule that an apprenticeship lasts eight years, an ordeal by boredom and frustration that he believes has throttled a great deal of creative editorial talent. His first assignment as fourth apprentice editor on William Wyler’s The Big Country (1958). The chief editor was Robert Swink, who became Ashby’s mentor. Swink taught him to “forget about the script, throw away all the so-called rules, and don’t try to second-guess the director. Just look at the film and let it guide you....Don’t be afraid of the film. You can cut it twenty-six different ways and, if none of these works, you can always put it back into daily form, and start over.”

Ashby worked with Swink on his next four films and was allowed to edit a few sequences of the last of these, The Best Man (1964). He moved up to assistant editor on The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965) and to chief editor on Tony Richardson’s The Loved One (1965); he had completed first cut when Richardson unexpectedly left to complete the editing in London. A period of depression and unemployment followed, and then Ashby was introduced to the director Norman Jewison, who needed an editor for The Cincinnati Kid (1965). He and Jewison got along exceptionally well, and the director used him again on The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming (1966), In the Heat of the Night (1967), and The Thomas Crown Affair (1968). Ashby says that Jewison “let me select and cut his films as I felt it. It was an editor’s dream and, in the end, it brought me two Academy nominations and one Oscar for In the Heat of the Night.”

Jewison made Ashby his associate producer—all-purpose assistant—on Gaily, Gaily (1969). The director then became interested in Bill Gunn’s script The Landlord. Finding that he could not fit it into his schedule, he offered to produce it if Ashby would care to direct. When Ashby had finished “doing a dance around the office,” they settled down to persuade the Mirisch Brothers and United Artists to gamble $2 million on an untried director.

Reasonably confident about the technical aspects of his task, Ashby became increasingly uncertain of his ability to handle actors. As the first day of shooting loomed after a week of rehearsals, he worked (and scared) himself “into a state of walking pneumonia.” For the first three days he was “just gaping all day and pointing a lot.” Finding that he could nevertheless communicate with his cast, “he enjoyed it from that point on.”

The Landlord (1970) was based on a novel by Kristin Hunter. It is a comedy about a rich white man, Elgar Enders (Bud Bridges), who at the age of twenty-one “runs away” from his Long Island mansion and buys a Brooklyn tenement in the promising ghetto of Park Slope. His plan is to evict the black tenants and turn the place into a fashionable pad for himself. The tenants, however, refuse either to move out of pay rent, and start to lay voodoo spells on him.

Before long he finds himself drawn into their lives, so violently different from his own. There is Fanny (Diana Sands), wretchedly married to the brutish Copee (Lou Gosset), who takes refuge in an affair with Enders; a free-school teacher (Melvin Stewart) struggling to instill racial pride in his students and the black earth mother Marge (Pearl Bailey), who undertakes Enders’ education in street wisdom. Marki Bey plays Lanie, a mulatto disco dancer who bridges the film’s two worlds and provides Enders with the possibility of a happy ending. Having rejected his own social group, Enders is rejected in turn by the ghetto, and moves out to live with Lanie and his boy by Fanny.

Compared to these passionate, hurt, and sometimes dangerous people, Enders’ family are caricatures out of a screwball comedy. Lee Grant is splendid as his imbecile mother, whose struggle for racial equality is limited to viewing Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? Her sister, Susan Anspach, is a spaced-out deb about to marry into napalm. To underline the contrast between Enders’ two worlds, Ashby had his cinematographer Gordon Willis underexpose the Brooklyn scenes and overexpose the Long Island ones, making the ghetto seem darker and more richly colored than reality, life in the mansion brighter and frothier.

These extreme contrasts of tone and image threaten to pull the film apart, and its cohesion is further undermined, as Paul Fritzler says, by “the flashy editing, fragmented narrative, flash-forwards, repeater shots, and straight-to-the-camera soliloquies.” Nevertheless, for Fritzler, “Ashby made it all work in a film that is both hilarious and haunting.” A few reviewers were irritated by this “stylistic slickness,” attributed by one to the influence of Norman Jewison, but most shared Fritzer’s enthusiasm, praising the performances the tyro director had drawn from his players, and calling this “a comedy of more than usual bite and vigor.”

Carl Dublicay, writing in Film Reader (1, 1975), suggested that the main theme in all of Ashby’s films is “how do we live?—not only a simple question...[but] an exhortation to examine our own lives and, in a large part, to change them.” As Dublicay says, this question central to The Landlord, is answered “in terms of an individualistic choice rather than a group solution” to the problem of race.

The Landlord was too offbeat a movie to make much impression at the box office, but its critical reception was good enough to bring Ashby an even less conventional script from Paramount. This was Harold and Maude, written by Colin Higgins as his thesis for a masters degree. Like Elgar Enders, Harold is a poor little rich boy with an appalling mother (Vivian Pickles). In late adolescence, pallid and wide-eyed, he is played by Bud Cort with a mixture of bewilderment and defiance that reminded David Robinson of Harry Langdon. Since the day he was mistakenly reported dead and wrung a flash of concern from his ice-cold mother, Harold has dedicated himself to faking more or less spectacular suicides—setting fire to himself or hanging himself from the drawing room chandelier (“I suppose you really know why it’s unnecessary to examine our own lives and, in a large part, to change them.”) As Dublicay says, this question central to The Landlord, is answered “in terms of an individualistic choice rather than a group solution” to the problem of race.
Afterwards, however, it slowly developed a cult reputation, especially among young people. It was so constantly revived in art houses that in 1978 Seattle-based Specialty Films made new prints and booked the film around the country, and this time it was greeted as a “contemporary classic” and “a work of art.” There are nevertheless some critics who, while relishing Harold’s black comedy, find the sixties-type dialogue and music (by Cat Stevens) dated, and Maude’s character and philosophizing whimsical and sentimental. David Thomson wrote: “The love story is prettified and sanitary: there is no real sex between Bud Cort and Ruth Gordon. It slips away into another feeble endorsement of ‘do your own thing,’ the politics of the weary soul-searcher, too selfish and superficial to deal with public causes.”

In 1973 Ashby was hired by MGM to direct a film starring Jack Nicholson. He walked out on that project when the studio turned down his choice of female lead, and Nicholson walked out with him, proposing as an alternative a screen version of Darryl Ponicsan’s novel *The Last Detail*. Columbia took the film on, Robert Towne wrote the excellent adaptation, and the movie was shot by Michael Chapman on location, partly at a military base near Toronto.

Jack Nicholson plays Bad-Ass Buddusky—a bantam, foulmouthed, Navy petty officer at a Virginia transit camp. With his black buddy Mule Mulhall (Otis Young), he is assigned to escort Meadows (Randy Quaid), a kleptomaniac young sailor, to the naval prison in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Meadows has been given eight years for pilfering forty dollars from a charity collection box—the charity being one dear to his CO’s wife. The escorts’ plan is to deliver their prisoner as rapidly as possible in order to live it up on expenses on the way back. However, appalled at the savagery of Meadows’s sentence and by his mooncalf innocence, they decide instead to give him a taste of all that he’ll be missing in the brig: his first drunk, his first fight, his first lay.

It is, as John Coleman wrote, “hardly a sentimental education. And yet, as...conveyed by glances, gestures, silences, the cliches of ‘being a man’—below-decks style—are reanimated, sweetened, lent value.” Richard Combs pointed out that the central drama “opens into an elusive, symbolic play on many kinds of human and specifically American, experience....Gradually, with a many-layered irony, the film reveals the trap in which the two guards, as much as their prisoner, willingly confine themselves. Scornful of the relief and resignation they see in Meadows’ unprotesting attitude (‘Secretly he’s glad...this way the worst is over already’), they themselves have happily traded insecurity for the rigid structures of the navy.”

Writing in the *International Film Guide* (1980), Diane Jacobs said that *The Last Detail* “is the film that made Ashby a talent to reckon with. Full of green and yellow military/motel colours, of quiet dissolves from one grey landscape to another, of tight framing in which anything beyond the proximate seems blurred and unreal, it is a bleak-looking film....The lives we observe are unremittingly constricted; and the sanguineness of the martial tunes that accompany the three men on their odyssey is a counterpoint that underscores this bitter reality. Movement is a dominant motif here, but the movement is away from rather than towards freedom.” The rhythmic montage editing that Ashby used in his first two films is here dispensed with, as Carl Dubiclay says: “The dissolve has replaced the cut, and the radical compression of time that took place in Ashby’s editing is reduced....This shift in technique is symptomatic of Ashby’s shift in emphasis...from issue to character. The question is still ‘how do we live,’ but Ashby now investigates the characters working out this question instead of exploring the question itself.”

According to Paul Fritzler, *The Last Detail’s* realistically obscene language greatly worried the Columbia executives, who feared that they would not be able to sell the film to television. It might not have been released at all if it had not scored a major success at the 1974 Cannes Film Festival, where Nicholson was voted the best actor. Columbia eventually distributed the picture, but with minimal promotion. It was very well received by American critics also, and earned Oscar nominations for its screenplay and for the performances of Nicholson and Randy Quaid. Many consider it Ashby’s best film. Skillfully edited by Jerry Ayres, it was shown in 1976 on ABC-TV, the sound track “scrubbed almost clean.” Questioning the propriety of this increasingly common procedure, John J. O’Connor wrote that the expurgated version “is not bad, but it is not the production seen by movie audiences.”

After that, Ashby was signed by the producers Saul Zaentz and Michael Douglas to direct *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, but resigned in a disagreement over the script. Milos Forman took over the film and Ashby immediately went to work on *Shampoo* (1976), produced for Persky-Bright Associates by Warren Beatty, who originated the project, starred in it, and scripted it in collaboration with Robert Towne.

*Shampoo* deals with some forty-eight hours in the life of George (Warren Beatty), a talented, ambitious, and handsome hairdresser in a fashionable Los Angeles salon. Engaged to the naive Jill (Goldie Hawn), he cannot resist going to bed with his eager customers: it really does make George happy to make women happy. One of these fortunate ladies is Felicia (Lee Grant), the rapacious wife of Lester (Jack Warden), a corrupt tycoon from whom George is trying to borrow the money to start his own salon. In the course of the film, George resumes his affair with Jackie (Julie Christie), who is Lester’s mistress and Jill’s best fried, and satisfies the sexual curiosity of Lester’s teengaged daughter (Carrie Fisher). In the end, not even George’s quick wits and fast motorbike can avoid disaster, and the whole fabric of deception and self-deception comes crashing down around him.

George’s escapes and embarrassments are the stuff of Restoration farce, but the narrative is put into a satirical context by the fact that it opens on the eve of the 1968 election that brought Richard Nixon to the Presidency. Fritzler says that *Shampoo* was “the first film nostalgically to mine the late 1960s, ‘evoking the generation gap, miniskirts, the Beatles, strobe lights, Spiro Agnew’s hypocritical holiness, and the dizzying hysterical freedom of the beginnings of the sexual revolution.”

The picture by no means escaped criticism. The attempt to equate the moral bankruptcy of the “beautiful people’ with Nixon’s election seemed to some critics unconvincing and pretentious, and many thought the final scenes a copout, demanding a degree of sympathy for the bereft George that he had not earned. All in all, however, *Shampoo* was enthusiastically received by the critics, praised for its script, a gallery of excellent performances, Paul Simon’s score, and “its awful seductiveness, a money-scented, high-colour gloss that owed a lot to Laszlo Kovacs’ photography and Richard Sylbert’s sets.” For Pauline Kael, it was “the most virtuoso example of sophisticated, kaleidoscopic farce that American moviemakers have ever come up with.”

Lee Grant collected an Oscar as best supporting actress, and *Shampoo* was a smash hit at the box office—Ashby’s first—earning him a contract from United Artists to direct *Bound for Glory* (1976), a $7 million biopic of Woody Guthrie, who wrote “This Land is Your Land” and influenced successive generations of
singers from Ramblin’ Jack Elliot to Bob Dylan and on. United Artists had already spent four years and a great deal of money on the project, and had finally acquired a workable script by Robert Getchell, based on Guthrie’s own autobiography. Ashby added some scenes filling in more of the social background and reportedly improvised a good deal of dialogue. He also won a battle with the studio to cast, as Guthrie, the notoriously “difficult” David Carradine—a choice that in the end was generally applauded.

The film opens in 1936 in Pampa, Texas, where Guthrie is trying to support his wife (Melinda Dillon) and two children as a sign-painter and part-time musician. The Dust Bowl town empties as people strike out for California, and Guthrie joins the exodus, hopping freight trains and hitching rides through a Depression America of grim poverty and brutal exploitation. In a California shanty town of migrant crop pickers, Guthrie’s talent is discovered by a local singer and union organizer, Ozark Blue (Ronnie Cox).

Blue soon has him playing and singing on the radio. He breaks off his affair with rich Gail Strickland and sends for his family, but antagonizes his sponsors by singing protest songs. Guthrie moves on again to sing to the workers in the San Joaquin Valley, returning bloody but unbowed to offers from CBS and the Coconut Grove. Auditioning for the latter, he overhears talk of “a simple hillbilly presentation” and walks out. We last see him back on the boxcars, singing his way into legend.

Pauline Kael wrote that Bound for Glory is “superbly lighted and shot [by Haskell Wexler] and has the visual beauty of a great movie,” but that unfortunately the filmmakers had been seduced by Guthrie’s own tendency to mythicize himself as “the voice of the downtrodden.” Most critics agreed, Clancy Sigal saying that “Woody makes an awkward Jesus figure. He abandoned his wife, picked up loose women, drank too much and could be infuriatingly irresponsible. Robert Getchell’s script defuses the real Guthrie by implying it was all in the name of People’s Art, of his refusal to conform to middle-class values.” This did not prevent Bound for Glory obtaining an Oscar for best photography and nominations for best picture and best screenplay, but the film was not successful at the box office.

Coming Home was initiated by Jane Fonda and Bruce Gilbert, whose work for the antiwar movement had awakened their concern for the plight of crippled Vietnam veterans. A script was written by Nancy Dowd, Jerome Hellman was engaged to produce, and John Schlesinger to direct. Waldo Salt worked on a revision of the Dowd script until a heart attack ended his involvement. There was no complete script when Ashby took over from Schlesinger and filming began. For a time, the director was shooting by day and writing by night in collaboration with his former editor, Robert Jones. According to Paul Fritzler, shooting was actually halted at times for a day of improvisation by the cast, the results of which were then fed into the script.

What came out of this exhausting and nerve-wracking procedure was a story set (like Shampoo) in Los Angeles in 1968. Fonda plays the wife of a hawkish Marine officer (Bruce Dern). When he goes off to Vietnam, she dutifully volunteers for work at the veteran’s hospital. The forgotten and embittered men she meets there change her from a conventional military wife into a committed and liberated woman, who has her first orgasm with a paraplegic (Jon Voigt). By the time her husband comes home, deranged by war, she and her lover are activists in the antiwar campaign. Learning from FBI snoops of his wife’s infidelity, the husband marches into the sea.

Fonda, Voigt, and the screenplay all got Oscars, and there were nominations for best picture, best director, and best supporting actor and actress. Some thoughtComing Home Ashby’s best picture, and it was financially successful. But for the first time, an Ashby movie seriously divided the critics. David Thomson called it “a movie that looks like a TV commercial...as adolescent and decadent a film as Hollywood has released in many years.”

What incensed critics like Thomson and Andrew Tudor is, as the latter wrote, that the film “operates in a political vacuum: a simple cry of anguish at the personal price that war has demanded….Coming Home is the sort of soft-centered movie which one might have expected ten years ago….In the end, and for all its evident qualities, Coming Home succumbs to its own style, to its insistence on presenting a coherent, ordered and ‘realistic’ story….Ashby’s film, though it does personalize the impact of Vietnam with more than a little skill, is finally no real advance on the definitive movie in that idiom: Wyler’s The Best Years of Our Lives.”

Ashby went on to direct Being There (1979), scripted by Jerzy Kosinski and Robert Jones from Kosinski’s novel, and produced by Andrew Braunsberg for Lorimar. Peter Sellers, in his last great role, plays Chance, a middle-aged simpleton raised by a mysterious guardian, whom he serves as gardener. Chance has never left the Old Man’s estate, his only contact with the outside world being the television that occupies all his leisure hours. Then the Old Man dies and Chance is cast out of his garden into the wilderness of Washington, D.C. Threatened by hooligans, he reflexively moves the switch of the TV remote control he has salvaged to “Off.”

More fortunately, he is knocked down by a limousine and taken home by its owner, Eve Rand (Shirley MacLaine): Eve! She lives in a grand mansion with her dying billionaire husband Ben (Melvyn Douglas), a political eminence grise. Chance the gardener, misheard, becomes Chauncey Gardiner, impeccably Wasp. What is more, his simple horticultural utterances are perceived as profound comments on the state of the nation—not only by his hosts but by their friends, who include the President of the United States (Jack Warden). Soon he is a household name, a television pundit, and a candidate himself for the Presidency. We last see him walking on water, or apparently so, as if this lobotomized Adam were, after all, the Messiah.

Being There provoked excited debate among psychologists, church leaders, and television pundits. It was so successful that it achieved second release within a year, and many film critics shared the general excitement. David Robinson praised it as a richly entertaining satirical fable, skillfully sustained throughout its 130 minutes, though “the strain begins to tell before the end.” Robinson thought it “a nice conceit to suppose a being formed out of the bland inoffensive nullity of diet of television,” and enjoyed the “goodhumoured jibes at the expense of the political mind—helplessly vulnerable to the unmitigated platitude.” Once again, however, there were some who actively disliked the film. Nigel Andrews, for example, called it “modern cinema at its most machine-made, its stiff-limbed automatism doled up with an all-purpose, spray-on prettiness of photography….It’s a dead, dire desolate movie.”

Ashby’s next two films, both from Lorimar, were both failures. Second-Hand Hearts (1980), from an old script by Charles Eastman, was originally called The Hamster of Happiness and was actually completed before Being There, its release being held up by a dispute between Lorimar and United Artists. It has Barbara Harris as a would-be saloon singer in El Paso and Robert Blake as the loser she marries in a drunken moment, before setting out with him and her three kids for California. A road movie of “garrulous
eccentricity,” this seemed to Richard Combs “very much a writer’s film.” David Denby thought that Ashby had directed it “with astonishingly little feeling for what holds an audience.”

The reviewers were no kinder to Lookin’ to Get Out (1982), written by Al Schwartz in collaboration with Jon Voigt. The latter appears as Alex Kovac, a small-time New York gambler with more than a touch of the Damon Runyons. He and his buddy Jerry (Burt Young) take off for Las Vegas to escape their creditors and recoup their fortunes. “Any viewer could bet the farm that Lookin’ to Get Out will hold no surprises,” wrote Richard Corliss. “Alex and Jerry will run a blackjack scam: they will win more than they hoped, lose more than they know, Ann-Margaret...will keep moving provocatively, to sidestep the carnage. The film was shot two-and-a-half years ago and Director Ashby has spent much of the time since then fine-tuning the editing. The effort shows, but not the effect: the picture is a sloppy mess that stumbles toward oblivion like a drunk on a losing streak.” Also released in 1982 was Let’s Spend the Night Together, Ashby’s excellent filmed record of the Rolling Stones’ 1981 American tour.

The Slugger’s Wife (1984), constructed perhaps on the theory that more is more, attempted to combine rock ‘n’ roll, baseball, and Neil Simon. The latter’s script, which reviewers found amazingly unfunny, concerns the problems of a two-career marriage. Both careers are glamorous and both careerists very young. He (Michael O’Keefe) is a major-league bonus baby who can’t hit unless his wife is cheering from the stands, and she (Rebecca de Mornay) is an aspiring singer who would rather be cutting a hit record of her own. David Sterritt thought the real mismatch was between the film’s writer and its director. “The characters speak their Simonized lines earnestly and correctly,” he observed, “while Ashby’s camerawork and editing tricks do spacey pirouettes all around them, throbbing to the beat of a rock score….Its not a winning combination.” Most critics restricted their praise to the supporting performances of Randy Quaid and CLEAVANT DERRICKS, as teammates, and of Martin Ritt, as their dyspeptic manager. But neither these assets nor the movie’s other attractions—which included eighteen pop songs,brief appearances by professional ballplayers and musicians, and some excruciating double entendres—could save the day at the box office.

8 Million Ways to Die (1986), about the drug-dealing night world of Los Angeles, is based on the mystery novels of Lawrence Block, with a screenplay by Oliver Stone, who wrote such other drug-traffick movies as Midnight Express, Scarface, and Year of the Dragon. Jeff Bridges stars as Matthew Scudder, a seedy, alcoholic detective with a sense of honor who becomes involved in a trail of crime and ugliness. Asked to come to an unfamiliar mansion in Malibu, a gambling club or brothel or both, he meets a frightened prostitute who asks his help and whose he becomes bent upon avenging. David Denby commented that Ashby “brings a shaggy narrative looseness” to this crime-thiller material, creating “some of the most raffish and entertaining scenes in recent American movies.” But other critics found the film a dismaying failure. Pauline Kael wrote that 8 Million Ways to Die is “pulpier and trashier than you might expect from Ashby. “Plot points don’t connect, as though they didn’t matter”; and Gene Siskel described the movie as “a boring, pointless thriller.” The saddest aspect of the film, he concluded, “is that it represents the continuing decline of Hal Ashby, once one of America’s best [directors].

Ashby has evidently hit a losing streak. The darling of the liberal critics in the early 1970s, he presumably earned their later hostility by making a series of worthy, expert, and highly successful films showing that he was, after all, neither a political radical nor an auteur. In spite of his uneven record in recent years, he remains a fine craftsman—a masterly director of actors, with a rare sense of montage and a genuine narrative gift.

Richard Armstrong: The Last Detail, from Senses of Cinema:

“This kid ain’t goin’ anywhere. On the outside too many bad things can happen to him. This way the worst part’s already behind him.”

– ’Bad Ass’ Buddusky

One of the most interesting aspects of that era of generational change we now call ‘New Hollywood’ was the way American cinema seemed to become more ‘American’ in scope and content. The way films such as Bonnie And Clyde (Arthur Penn, 1967), Easy Rider (Dennis Hopper, 1969), The Last Picture Show (Peter Bogdanovich, 1971) and Paper Moon (Bogdanovich, 1973) looked and sounded evoked an American national cinema steeped in real histories and vernacular sensibilities. The “tight, clean, knowing” quality of The Last Detail comes across like a salty anecdote told by an ex-sailor in a New York bar.

The film appeared during the closing moves of a Vietnam War that began in Cold War complacency and ended in face-saving withdrawal. Afflicted by war trauma, the Watergate crisis, and, for the first time since the 1941-45 conflict, economic insufficiency, the ’70s were difficult years for Americans. As a Souza-esque brass band theme plays behind the credits for Jack Nicholson, Robert Towne, Hal Ashby, iconic figures of that New Hollywood renaissance, you realize the patriotic zeal will be tinged with irony. The autumnal Norfolk, Virginia naval base from which three sailors embark gives way to snow and wind as they head north into increasingly desolate Washington, New York and Boston. Compare the pessimistic greys and blacks of Ashby’s film with the desultory blue-collar worlds of such contemporaneous works as The French Connection (William Friedkin, 1971), Rocky (John G. Avildsen, 1976) and Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976).

As critic James Monaco observed in his SIGHT AND SOUND review, few American films treat working class life without condensation. Nominaly evoking the studio GIs-at-liberty comedy typified perhaps by MGM’s On The Town (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1949), The Last Detail has none of the vivacity of a society in triumphant post-war overdrive. Less interested in the traditional metaphor for movie-going pleasure suggested by the MGM sailors’ hi-jinks, the prospect of ambivalent petty officers going on a hootenanny whilst escorting a rating to the brig is staged in a workaday society in the grip of quiet desperation. Ordinary Seaman Meadows (Randy Quaid) has never been drunk, stoned or laid. He is about to be incarcerated for trying to steal $40.00 from a polio donation can, losing the liberties that most young Americans take for granted. Meanwhile, after a brief respite Signalman 1st Class ‘Bad Ass’ Buddusky (Jack Nicholson) and Gunner’s Mate ‘Mule’ Mulhall (Otis Young) reluctantly return to duty that is all the more onerous for what Meadows’ innocence has revealed of their own status as navy ‘lifers.’ Whether in work or in trouble, working stiffs spend whole lives in debt to the system, savouring passion and intoxication in the narrow interstices of the day. Whilst On the Town revelled in a fantasy of off-duty love and anarchy, The Last Detail sees unremitting duty and unpitying authority as the average Joe’s American legacy.

Like other New Hollywood films, The Last Detail draws upon an unbeautiful American experience. For Peter Biskind, Quaid looks “like a cartoon character, a pesty-faced doll awkwardly fashioned out of soft cheese.” We are reminded of those Brueghelesque rubes played by Michael J. Pollard and Gene Wilder in Bonnie And Clyde, so grotesque but so redolent of authentic
American subways and diners. The boys fetch up at a party full of counterculture types who ask ‘Mule’ why there are not more black officers. Because they need a recommendation from a white man, comes the answer. At a Buddhist self-awareness group, the interlopers stand dumbfounded before an America so atomised Americans can barely understand each other. Alienate by their odyssey through this uncomprehending society, the boys decide to have a picnic in the middle of a snowbound park, its pointless benches standing in regimented rows around them. If Ashby's Harold And Maude (1971) showed a director in sympathy with social incomprenhension and outsider-hood, The Last Detail also responds to the protest sensibility of a new generation of filmmakers who rebel against the rigid Hollywood establishment.

A wilful iconoclast, Ashby promoted Michael Chapman – who in 1975 will shoot Taxi Driver – from camera operator to DOP for The Last Detail.

At the heart of the film's complaint against established hierarchy is Buddusky. When we first see him, he is asleep, making Nicholson/Buddusky's subsequent performance all the more dynamic, engaged. Coming on with the pugnacity of a James Cagney or the young Kirk Douglas, Nicholson/Buddusky is fuelled by frustration, rage and violence. See him trying to get Meadows to take a poke at him. See him strutting for some passing marines, poised somewhere between prize-fighter and prostitute. As he proudly declaims his ‘handle’ in public, the moment resonates with that then-recent anti-Hollywood manifesto of black rage Sweet Sweetback's Baad Assss Song (Melvin Van Peebles, 1971). If Jack Nicholson became infamous for overripe performativity in the `80s, the actor comes alive as Buddusky because his performance is actually about something, a navy lifer's need to keep his head amid the oppressive pedantry of service life and the apparent apathy of the civilians he serves.

Few films have such a sense of time running out, an obsession with finitude that renders each coarse naturalistic second poigniant. When they take Meadows to the whorehouse, he must choose quickly and well. When he thinks he has fallen in love, the still-waiting camera urges him to speak up before it's too late. When he tries to escape through the park, we pray that Buddusky won't load his revolver in time. When the three men sprawl like schoolboys on the snowy ground, it is getting dark. Two years after The Last Detail, Jaws (Steven Spielberg, 1975) appeared, marking the emergence of the synergy-driven corporate blockbuster that would mean death to little New Hollywood junkets like this. In 1988 Ashby himself was dead.

The Last Detail from Wikipedia

Production
Producer Gerry Ayres had bought the rights to Darryl Ponicson’s novel in 1969. After returning from the set of Drive, He Said, Robert Towne began adapting the novel. The screenwriter tailored the script for close friends Jack Nicholson and John Cazale. In adapting the novel, Towne removed Buddusky’s “closet intellectualism and beautiful wife.” The screenwriter also changed the ending so that Buddusky lives instead of dying as he does in the book. Ayres convinced Columbia Pictures to produce the film based on his consultant's credit on Bonnie & Clyde but had difficulty getting it made because of the studio’s concern about the bad language in Towne’s script. Columbia objected to the number of curse words in the script. Peter Guber recalls, “The first seven minutes, there were 342 ‘fucks.’” The head of Columbia asked Towne to reduce the number of curse words to which the writer responded, “This is the way people talk when they’re powerless to act; they bitch.” Towne refused to tone down the language and the project remained in limbo until Nicholson, by then a bankable star, got involved.

Ayres sent the script to Robert Altman and then Hal Ashby. Ayres remembers, “I thought that this was a picture that required a skewed perspective, and that’s what Hal had.” Ashby was coming off the disappointing commercial and critical failure of Harold and Maude and was in pre-production on Three-Cornered Circle at MGM when Jack Nicholson told him about The Last Detail, his upcoming film at Columbia. The director had actually been sent the script in the fall of 1971 and the reader’s report called it “lengthy and unimaginative,” but he now found it very appealing. He wanted to do it but it conflicted with his schedule for Three-Cornered Circle. However Ashby pulled out of his deal with MGM and Nicholson suggested that they team up on The Last Detail. Columbia did not like Ashby because he had a reputation of distrusting authority and made little effort to communicate with executives. The budget was low enough, at $2.6 million, for him to get approved.

Casting
Nicholson was set to play Buddusky and so the casting of The Last Detail focused mainly on the roles of Mule and Meadows. But Cort met with Ashby and begged to play Meadows but the director felt that he was not right for the role. Stalmaster gave Ashby a final selection of actors and the two that stood out were Randy Quaid and John Travolta. As originally written, the character of Meadows was a “helpless little guy,” but Ashby wanted to cast Quaid in the role, who was 6’4”. He had offbeat and vulnerable qualities that Ashby wanted. Towne remembers thinking, “There’s a real poignancy to this huge guy’s helplessness that’s great. I thought it was a fantastic choice, and I’d never thought of it.”

Pre-production
The project stalled for 18 months while Nicholson made The King of Marvin Gardens. Guber told Ayres that he could get Burt Reynolds, Jim Brown and David Cassidy and a new writer and he would approve production immediately. Ayres rejected this proposal and the studio agreed to wait because they were afraid that the producer would take the film to another studio. Ashby and Ayres read Navy publications and interviewed current and ex-servicemen who helped them correct minor errors in the script. The director wanted to shoot on location at the naval base in Norfolk, Virginia and the brig at Portsmouth, New Hampshire but was unable to get permission from the United States Navy. However, the Canadian Navy was willing to cooperate and in mid-August 1972, Ashby and his casting director, Lynn Stalmaster, traveled to Toronto, Ontario to look at a naval base and meet with actors. The base suited their needs and Ashby met Carol Kane whom he would cast in small role.

Ashby was busted for possession of marijuana while scouting locations in Canada. This almost changed the studio’s mind about backing the project but the director’s drug bust was not widely reported and Nicholson remained fiercely loyal to him, which was a deciding factor. Just as the film was about to go into production, Cross was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Ashby postponed principal photography for a week to allow Crosse to deal with the news and decide if he still wanted to do the film. The actor decided not to do the film and Ashby and Stalmaster scrambled to find a replacement. They cast Otis Young.
Principal photography
Ashby decided to shoot the film chronologically to help the inexperienced Quaid and recently cast Young ease into their characters. With the exception of Toronto doubling as Norfolk, the production shot on location, making the same journey as the three main characters. Early on, Quaid was very nervous and wanted to make a good impression. Ashby kept a close eye on the actor but allowed him to develop into the role. Haskell Wexler was supposed to shoot The Last Detail but he could not get a union card for an East Coast production and so Ashby asked Nestor Almendros and Gordon Willis but they were both unavailable. Ashby promoted Michael Chapman, his camera operator on The Landlord, to director of photography. They worked together to create a specific look for the film that involved using natural light to create a realistic, documentary-style. Ashby let Nicholson look through the camera’s viewfinder as a shot was being set up so he knew the parameters of a given scene and how much freedom he had within the frame. The actor said, “Hal is the first director to let me go, to let me find my own level.”

Post-production
The day after principal photography was completed, Ashby had his senior editor send what he had cut together so far. The director was shocked at the results and fired the editor. He was afraid that he would have to cut the film himself. Ayres recommended bringing in Robert C. Jones, one of the fastest editors in the business who had been nominated for an Academy Award for Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? Jones put the film back into rushes and six weeks later had a first cut ready that ran four hours. Ashby was very impressed with his abilities and trusted him completely. Jones cut the film with Ashby at the filmmaker’s home and the process took an unusually long time as the director agonized over all the footage he had shot. Ashby would ignore phone calls from Columbia and eventually executives higher and higher up the corporate ladder tried to contact him. Ashby was in London, England meeting with Peter Sellers about doing Being There when he received a phone call from Jones who told him that Columbia was fed up with the time it was taking for the film to be assembled. The head of the studio’s editing department called Jones to say that a representative was coming to take the film. Jones refused to give up the film and Ashby called the studio and managed to calm them down. Towne occasionally visited Ashby’s house to check in and didn’t like the pacing of the film. According to Towne, Ashby “left his dramatizing to the editing room, and the effect was a thinning out of the script.” During the editing process, Columbia hated the jump cuts Ashby employed. The studio was also concerned about the number of expletives. It needed a commercial hit as they were in major financial trouble. By August 1973, the final cut of The Last Detail was completed and submitted to the MPAA which gave it an R rating. Columbia was still not happy with the film and asked for 26 lines with the word “fuck” in them to be cut. The theatrical release of The Last Detail was delayed for six months while Columbia fought over the profanity issue. Ashby convinced Columbia to let him preview the film as it was to see how the public would react. It was shown in San Francisco and the screening was a huge success.

Release
The Last Detail was nominated for the Palme d’Or at the 1964 Cannes Film Festival and Nicholson was awarded Best Actor. It was also nominated for three Academy Awards—Jack Nicholson for Best Actor in a Leading Role, Randy Quaid for Best Actor in a Supporting Role, and Robert Town for Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium with none of them winning. In addition, The Last Detail was nominated for two Golden Globe Awards—Nicholson for Best Motion Picture Actor—Drama and Quaid for Best Supporting Actor—Motion Picture. Nicholson did win a BAFTA award for his role in the film. Nicholson won the Best Actor awards from the National Society of Film Critics and the New York Film Critics Circle. However, he was disappointed that he failed to win an Oscar for his performance. “I like the idea of winning at Cannes with The Last Detail, but not getting our own Academy Award hurt real bad. I did it in that movie, that was my best role.”

Sequel
In 2006, filmmaker Richard Linklater expressed an interest in adapting Last Flag Flying, a sequel to The Last Detail, into a film. He wrote a screenplay and sent a copy to Quaid but said that he would not do it unless Nicholson was involved. In the novel, Buddusky runs a bar and is reunited with Larry Meadows after his son is killed in the Iraq War. It was rumored that Morgan Freeman was interested in taking over the role of Mule from Otis Young, who died in 2001.