



November 14, 2006 XIII: 11
FIVE EASY PIECES 96 min (1970)

Produced and Directed by Bob Rafelson
 Story by Carole Eastman and Bob Rafelson
 Script by Carole Eastman (as Adrien Joyce)
 Cinematography by László Kovács

Jack Nicholson...Robert Eroica Dupea
 Karen Black...Rayette Dipesto
 Billy Green Bush...Elton
 Fannie Flagg...Stoney
 Sally Struthers...Betty
 Marlena MacGuire...Twinky
 Richard Stahl...Recording Engineer
 Lois Smith...Partita Dupea
 Helena Kallianiotis...Palm Apodaca
 Toni Basil...Terry Grouse
 Lorna Thayer...Waitress
 Susan Anspach...Catherine Van Oost
 Ralph Waite...Carl Fidelio Dupea
 William Challee...Nicholas Dupea
 John P. Ryan...Spicer
 Irene Dailey...Samia Glavia

Oscar nominations for best actor (Nicholson), best supporting actress (Black), best picture, best writing

Selected by the National Film Preservation Board for the National Film Registry

BOB RAFELSON (21 February 1933) has directed 11 theatrical and several made-for-tv films, among them *The House on Turk Street* (2002), *Blood and Wine* (1996), *Wet* (1995), *Black Widow* (1987), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), *Modesty* (1981), *Stay Hungry* (1976), *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972), *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) and *Head* (1968).

LÁSZLÓ KOVÁCS (14 May 1933, Budapest, Hungary) has shot 74 films, most recently *Torn from the Flag* (2006), which is currently in post-production. Some of the others are *Two Weeks Notice* (2002), *Miss Congeniality* (2000), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *Shattered* (1991), *Legal Eagles* (1986), *Mask* (1985), *Ghost Busters* (1984), *The Toy* (1982), *The Legend of the Lone Ranger* (1981), *F.I.S.T.* (1978), *Nickelodeon* (1976), *Harry and Walter Go to New York* (1976), *Shampoo* (1975), *Paper Moon* (1973), *Steelyard Blues* (1973), *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972), *What's Up, Doc?* (1972), *The Last Movie* (1971), *Getting Straight* (1970), *Easy Rider* (1969), *Targets* (1968), *Hells Angels on Wheels* (1967), *The Notorious Daughter of Fanny Hill* (1966), and *Kiss Me Quick!/ Dr. Breedlove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies!?!?* (1964).

JACK NICHOLSON (22 April 1937, Neptune, NJ) has acted in 70 films and television programs. His most recent film is Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* (2006). He was nominated for eight Best Actor and four Best Supporting Oscars and won three of them: *As Good as it Gets* (1997, leading), *Terms of Endearment* (1983, supporting), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (leading, 1975). The nominations were for *About Schmidt* (2002), *A Few Good Men* (1992), *Ironweed* (1987), *Reds* (1981), *Chinatown* (1974), *The Last Detail* (1973), *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) and *Easy Rider* (1969). Some of his other films are *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), *The Crossing Guard* (1995), *Hoffa* (1992), *A Few Good Men* (1992), *The Two Jakes* (1990), *Batman* (1989), *Broadcast News* (1987), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), *Heartburn* (1986), *Prizzi's Honor* (1985), *The Border* (1982), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), *The Shining* (1980), *Goin' South* (1978), *The Last Tycoon* (1976), *The Missouri Breaks* (1976), *The Last Detail* (1973), *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972), *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), *Hells Angels on Wheels* (1967), *The Shooting* (1967) *Ride in the Whirlwind* (1965), *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), and *The Cry Baby Killer* (1958). He directed *The Two Jakes* (1990), *Goin' South* (1978) and *Drive, He Said* (1971).

KAREN BLACK (1 July 1939, Park Ridge, Illinois) has acted in 169 films and television programs, the most recent of which are *Irene in Time*, *Watercolors*, *Hollywood Dreams*, *Suffering Man's Charity* and *One Long Night*, all of which are currently in post-production. Some of the others are *Read You Like a Book* (2006), *Dr. Rage* (2005), *Summer Solstice* (2003), *Dinosaur Valley Girls* (1996), *Return of the Roller Blade Seven* (1993), *Dead Girls Don't Tango* (1992), *Bound and Gagged: A Love Story* (1992), *The Roller Blade Seven* (1991), *Fatal Encounter* (1990), *Hostage* (1987), *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982), *In Praise of Older Women* (1978), *Burnt Offerings* (1976), *Family Plot* (1976), *Nashville* (1975), *The Day of the Locust* (1975), *Airport 1975* (1974), *The Great Gatsby* (1974), *Rhinoceros* (1974), *Portnoy's Complaint* (1972), *Cisco Pike* (1972), *Drive, He Said* (1971), *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), *Easy Rider* (1969), and *The Prime Time* (1960).

"Bob Rafelson" from *World Film Directors, V. II*. Ed. John Wakeman. H. W. Wilson Co., NY, 1988. Entry by Teresa Grimes

Born and grew up in New York City. In his teens he left home several times, once to ride in rodeos in Arizona and on another occasion to play drums and bass with a jazz band in Acapulco. For a time he settled down to study philosophy at Dartmouth College, where he also wrote a prize-winning play. After graduating he was inducted into the US Army. He was stationed in Japan, where he worked as a disc jockey on an army radio station and as a translator of Japanese films, as well as advising the Shochiku Company on what films to export to the United States. (In this capacity Rafelson vetoed several classic Japanese films, including works by Yasujiro Ozu, which he loved but could not believe would find an audience in America.)

Completing his army service, Rafelson at first considered going to India to do graduate work in philosophy at Benares University. Instead he joined CBS as a story editor for David Susskind's *Play of the Week*—a much-praised series of adaptations of classical and contemporary drama. As the work involved reading literally hundreds of plays, it served as an intensive theatrical education for Rafelson, who also wrote "additional dialogue" for various plays, including some by Shakespeare.

Rafelson's professional involvement with the film industry began in the early 1960s. For a short time he was an associate producer at Universal, but an altercation over artistic policy with the studio's chief executive, Lew

Wasserman, put an abrupt end to the job (Wasserman told him to come back when he had learned that "film is a very

collaborative process"). As a producer he worked for Revue Productions, Desilu, and Screen Gems. In 1965, when he was working on *The Wackiest Ship in the Army* for Screen Gems, he met Bert Schneider, a fellow producer who was to be influential in Rafelson's transition from producer to film director.

From 1966 to 1968 Rafelson and Schneider coproduced the immensely successful television series *The Monkees*, featuring a pop group which, in the wake of the Beatles' success, had been manufactured for the series. Rafelson picked the four Monkees from nearly five hundred applicants and says he "grooved on those four in very special ways while thinking that they had absolutely no talent." This limitation in part dictated the form that the programs took—"the whole show was created in effect in the editing room. The tempo was of paramount importance—the programs were very fast moving with a lot of musical numbers, and I had to direct one or two of the shows for television to set the pattern of how these things should be made." The methods of production developed in this series influenced Rafelson's subsequent career—"of the first thirty-two shows, twenty-nine were

directed by people who had never directed before—including me. So the idea of using new directors not perhaps too encumbered by traditional ways of thinking was initiated on that series, and just continued in the movies we made later.”

The partnership between Bob Rafelson and Bert Schneider was placed on a firmer and more independent basis when they formed the company BBS, a subsidiary of Columbia Pictures, to make *Head* (1968), Rafelson’s debut as a director. Though it features the Monkees, the film is by no means a mere spin off from the television series, and was intended in fact as an exposure (or confession) of the whole process of commercial manipulation and exploitation so well illustrated by the Monkees’ success. The film was written by Rafelson and the actor Jack Nicholson, and together they let their imaginations run riot.” Of course *Head* is an utterly and totally fragmented film.” Rafelson says. “Among other reasons for making it was that I thought I would never get to make another movie, so I might as well make fifty to start out with and put them all in the same feature.”

The picture has little in the way of plot, being mainly a kaleidoscopic collage of color-saturated psychedelic effects and stylized parodies of such genres as Westerns, war films, desert pictures, and musicals—there is a particularly well-staged black-on-white/white-on-black dance number that has been interpreted as a tribute to Vincent Minnelli. All this is intercut with clips from old movies, television commercials, and documentary footage from Vietnam. Rafelson also makes witty use of surrealistic sets—at one point the Monkees are sucked through a huge vacuum cleaner (reminiscent of Claes Oldenburg’s larger-than-life household objects), ending up as flecks of dandruff in Victor Mature’s hair (a metaphor, no doubt, for the dehumanizing process through which any media product has to pass). *Head* was found particularly interesting in the way it exploits the cinema’s capacity for visual illusion to draw attention to the mythic world that the movies present in a culture fascinated with “image.” Annette Funicello, Sonny Wilson, Frank Zappa, and Victor Mature appear “as themselves,” and both Rafelson and Jack Nicholson (“as filmmakers”) can be glimpsed briefly in the movie.

Since *Head* appeared when the popularity of the Monkees had already declined, it was not a commercial success. And Rafelson says that “*Head* was never thought of by me or my partner as a picture that would make money.” The last shot of the film shows the Monkees boxed up on the back of a truck being driven out of the studio gates, a prophetic comment on the fate of the group once they ceased to be profitable. As Victor Mature—in a director’s chair—is with them, the shot also reflects Rafelson’s assumption that his first film would also be his last. In spite of its limited release, however, *Head* achieved and has retained a kind of cult reputation.

That Rafelson was able to make further films is due in large measure to the unexpected success of *Easy Rider*, directed by Dennis Hopper and produced by Bert Schneider for BBS. It was on Rafelson’s recommendation that Jack Nicholson was cast in the film, which gave the actor his first major break. Rafelson explains that when they were writing *Head* “Jack would act out all the parts, as would I, and my eyes were just glued to the expressions on his face and the intensity he brought to the performance in a script conference. I told him that the next time I made a picture he had to be in it. Meanwhile I persuaded Dennis Hopper that Jack might be right for the role in *Easy Rider*.” The overwhelming success of that low-budget picture came at a time when most of the major studios seemed in imminent danger of financial collapse. Dazzled by *Easy Rider*’s receipts, a normally conservative industry began to gamble on unknown directors and youth-oriented themes, ushering in a period of relative creative freedom and a more open form of film production characterized by small crews, small budgets, and filming on location instead of in the studio. BBS, backed by Columbia, continued to thrive and over the next few years produced a series of films expressing the disenchantment with American values that became identified with the youth culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Among them were Bob Rafelson’s next two films.

Rafelson kept his promise and gave Jack Nicholson the leading role in *Five Easy Pieces* (1970). The original idea was Rafelson’s but the script was written by Adrien Joyce (a pseudonym for Carol Eastman). “Five easy pieces” of country and western music are heard in the film, and five of classical music, reflecting the central character’s divided interests. He is the Bobby Dupea, a young man working as an oil rigger in southern California and living with his waitress girlfriend Rayette (Karen Black). It becomes increasingly obvious that beer and bowling and the other pastimes of his hard-hat companions are not quite enough for him. In time we learn that he comes from an elitist family of musicians and had himself been a gifted concert pianist. Having rejected (or failed to meet) the standards expected of him, he has dropped out: “I move around a lot. Not because I’m looking for anything really, but to get away from things that go bad if I stay.”

Bobby is persuaded to go home when he learns from his sister that their father has had a stroke, and reluctantly takes Rayette with him. Some of the most memorable sequences take place on the road, like the “no substitutions” scene in a diner, which culminates in an expressive gesture of frustration when Bobby sweeps the table clean of plates and cutlery in his rage at an obstinate waitress. Bobby leaves Rayette in a motel and goes on alone to the family home on Puget Sound. Bored and uneasy in the ordered routine of the household, Bobby makes a pass at his brother’s fiancée (Susan Anspach). She eventually goes to bed with him but, with the unexpected arrival of Rayette, rejects him, saying, “How can you ask

someone to give, when you give nothing yourself.” Accepting her appraisal of him, Bobby drives away with Rayette. The ending of the film is bleakly unresolved: on the spur of the moment, Bobby abandons Rayette at a gas station and hitches a ride north to Alaska—the last shot shows the truck receding into the distance. In fact, at least two other possible endings were written for the film, and Rafelson was not sure until the last day of shooting which he would choose. “I try to remain susceptible to what the characters are telling me,” he has said, and this was characteristic of the improvisatory and collaborative nature of the movement to which he belonged, the New American Cinema—a loose organization of East Coast independent filmmakers of the time.

The film was a hit, particularly with younger audiences, and received the New York Critics’ Award as the best picture of the year. Penelope Gilliatt called it “a striking movie—eloquent, important, written and improvised in a clear-hearted American that derives from no other civilization,” while David Robinson described Rafelson as “a new director who uses film with the subtlety of a novelist, but without losing any of the concentration and economy potential in the cinema’s unique mixture of image and sound.” Many critics noted its Chekhovian quality, “its skepticism and understated complexity,” express through Rafelson’s unemphatic camera movements and low-key realism. Jack Nicholson’s performance was warmly praised, especially its evocation of the restlessness and polarity of Bobby’s temperament, ranging between extroverted exuberance and moody self-questioning. The scene with his father, who is immobilized and unable to talk, was found particularly moving: Bobby breaks down, confesses his failure to live up to the old man’s expectations, and asks incoherently for some kind of forgiveness. Rafelson himself describes Bobby as “a guy who is out of touch with his feelings,” and says, “I wanted to make a movie where I liked everyone in the movie.... Bobby, the hero, I love him. I couldn’t have made the movie if I hadn’t loved him.”

Rafelson starred Jack Nicholson again in *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972), this time casting him against type, as the withdrawn, neurotic David Staebler (the name itself, Rafelson has said, is a clue to the subject of the film: instability). ...Like *Five Easy Pieces*, the film was photographed by Laslo Kovacs, and the studied formality of many of the shots emphasizes the subjective, idiosyncratic quality of the work. The tawdry splendor of out-of-season Atlantic City, with its massive, opulent, but decaying hotels inhabited mainly by the aged, echoes the failure of Jason’s illusions and of an American Dream that has become an obsolete fantasy. The film’s ambiguities are more intricately wrought than in *Five Easy Pieces*, its formality more carefully composed, but it is a somber, difficult, and disquieting work and was not a commercial success....

Before he made his next picture, Rafelson spent over a year doing research for a film he was hoping to make on the slave trade. He traveled some five thousand miles in West Africa, virtually “living the life of many of the characters I’d read about,” but the film never materialized. After this demanding experience, Rafelson felt that he “wanted to turn to something more cheerful, to project a more exhilarating aspect of myself.” The result was *Stay Hungry* (1976), adapted by Rafelson and Charles Gaines from the latter’s novel (and made considerably more upbeat in the process).

Like Rafelson’s other films, *Stay Hungry* is concerned with the distorting effects of family relationships, but unlike them it leans more toward manic comedy than austere realism. Whereas in *Five Easy Pieces* and *Marvin Gardens* action is internalized, in *Stay Hungry* Rafelson employs an expressive, mobile camera in keeping with the physical bravura, extrovert energies, and moral optimism of the film’s theme. The story centers on Craig Blake (Jeff Bridges), whose parents have died in a plane crash, leaving him the master of a colonial mansion in Birmingham, Alabama. The start of the film finds him listless and dissatisfied in the class-bound society that his upbringing has condemned him to. Involvement in a shady real-estate deal takes him to the Olympic Spa, a gymnasium where Joe Santo (played by real-life Austrian muscleman Arnold Schwarzenegger) is training for the Mr. Universe title.

The friendship he strikes up with Santo introduces Craig to the amiably bizarre world of bodybuilding and leads to an affair with Mary Tate (Sally Field), the Olympic’s receptionist. ...

Joe Santo, a product of European culture who nevertheless seems much more at home in the garish, competitive world of this film than Craig, the all-American boy, explains to the letter his belief in the need to retain vulnerability: “You see you can’t grow without burning. I don’t like being too comfortable. Once you get used to it it’s hard to give up. I like to stay hungry.” It may be supposed that this is Rafelson’s philosophy also. The director has explained his three major films in these terms: “*Five Easy Pieces* is the study of the misdirection of energy. *Marvin Gardens* is the study of the repression of energy and *Stay Hungry* is the study of the expression of it.” In a formal as well as a thematic sense, *Stay Hungry* marks a progression for Rafelson: “I have a tendency towards circularity, things beginning and ending at the same place.... While *Stay Hungry* begins and ends with the image of the house, nothing is the same for any of the characters. They have all changed. I had never done that with any of my characters before.”

Bob Rafelson shares with other members of the American “new wave” an intense concern with authenticity and subjectivity. Rafelson takes this further than most: he worked on oil rigs before making *Five Easy Pieces* and traveled with bodybuilders before making *Stay Hungry*,

while *The King of Marvin Gardens* draws both on Rafelson's experiences as a disc jockey in Japan and his relationship with his own brother. Such an approach goes beyond research, suggesting a need to undergo an experience before stepping back behind the camera to record it. It is this degree of personal involvement that appears to determine the subjective and at times idiosyncratic nature of the end product. Rafelson's films are determinedly uneasy. Embodying contradictions without necessarily resolving them. As he puts it, "I find the intentions of simple, straightforward narrative so compellingly and embarrassingly predictable in most instances that I tend to search out other possibilities."

In view of all hits, it is scarcely surprising that he finds it difficult to accept the compromises that have always been part of the Hollywood filmmaker's dues: "I don't want to have to sit down a year later and look at a movie I did and have any regrets about it. I don't want to have to live with that kind of aesthetic conscience." Unfortunately, once the crisis in the film industry had passed, the studios lost interest in small personal films like Rafelson's and turned gratefully to a new generation of commercially oriented "professionals" like Steven Spielberg. In 1976 Rafelson himself said, "I felt that I'd like to work faster and direct something that is totally outside myself. I rather look forward to the challenge of being ordinary."

In 1978 he spent several days in a top security prison preparing for *Brubaker* (1978), a prison drama starring Robert Redford, but after ten days shooting he was fired and replaced by director Stuart Rosenberg. Several years later, however, he directed *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), a remake of the 1946 noir classic based on the James M. Cain novel and starring John Garfield and Lana Turner. Not surprisingly, the two versions were frequently compared by reviewers, with most critics preferring the more suspenseful pacing and

pent-up eroticism of the original. Although a compelling presence on the screen, Jack Nicholson was thought less convincing as a youthful drifter caught up in passion and murder than John Garfield, and Jessica Lange less credible than Turner as the restless wife of an older man, the immigrant owner of a roadside filling station and diner.

The screen adaptation by playwright David Mamet emphasized features of the novel that coincided with Rafelson's own distinctive cinematic version, that of a peculiarly American tragedy. Each of the principal characters was "placed" in the Depression setting and depicted to some extent as the victim of secondhand dreams—the Nicholson anti-hero pursuing "freedom" and "opportunity" with another man's wife; the adulterous wife putting away her savings to buy some vague eventual happiness; her husband grubbing out an existence and blinded to his situation by a sentimental ideal of domestic bliss. Despite powerful individual scenes and some steamy sex, the movie was felt to be unsuccessful as a whole. Stanley Kauffmann considered Rafelson's direction so lacking in style and coherence that the characters came to seem mere puppets, and Pauline Kael objected to his "overcontrolled" and too "methodical" pacing. His camera, she commented, "stays at a chilling distance and never heats up." Most critics found the movie overlong (it is twelve minutes longer than the 1946 version) and unclear in its denouement.



THE FINAL THREE COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XIII, FALL 2006:

Nov 21 Nicolas Roeg **The Man Who Fell to Earth** 1976
Nov 28 Spike Lee **Do the Right Thing** 1989
Dec 5 Peter Greenaway **Prospero's Books** 1991

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