

“Midnight Cowboy” Revisited: Making New Sense of an Iconic Old Film

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I subscribe to The Criterion Channel, a streaming service that specializes in classic old films. A week ago, as I write this, it featured the 1969 American film, though with a British director, “Midnight Cowboy.” I was in my late twenties back then and saw it in a Minneapolis movie theater, the only option back in those days; no DVDs or streaming. I hadn’t seen it again until I streamed it this week—a gap of fifty years, a half century, my gosh. Watching it again piqued my interest in the film and prompted me to engage in some fairly intense investigation, analysis, and assessment these last few days, which included reading for the first time the novel on which the film is based, also called *Midnight Cowboy* (“midnight cowboy” is slang for a male hustler). This writing reports what came out of that activity.

“Midnight Cowboy” has turned out to be one of the three iconic American films of the 1960s—the other two, “The Graduate” and “Easy Rider.” One’s understanding of that time in American history is enhanced by a consideration of the social and cultural significance of these films, how they both reflected and shaped collective and individual life. And since one thing leads to another, giving attention to them will shed light on contemporary reality and how it got to be this way, which includes how you, if you are an American, and perhaps even if you aren’t, think about things and conduct your life.

“Midnight Cowboy” is set in New York City’s Times Square and focuses on what would seem on the face of it to be a most unlikely friendship between two men on the margin of American life: Joe Buck (played by Jon Voight), late-twenties, tall, blond, a naïve aspiring male prostitute newly arrived on a bus from small-town Texas decked out in the cowboy clothes he has just purchased; and Enrico “Ratso” Rizzo (played by Dustin Hoffman), early-

thirties, Bronx native, short, dark, petty thief and conman with a limp, rotting teeth, and consumptive ill health barely surviving alone in an abandoned tenement building.

“Midnight Cowboy” won three Academy Awards in 1970: Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screenplay. Both Voight and Hoffman were nominated for Best Actor. It was the only X-rated film (largely for what was considered its homosexual frame of reference) ever to win Best Picture. A couple of years later, without any changes in the film, the rating was changed to an R. The X category, which no longer exists, was associated with pornography—“Midnight Cowboy” is definitely not pornographic. The American Film Institute ranked “Midnight Cowboy” 43rd in its list of the 100 greatest American films of all time. The Library of Congress deemed it “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant” and selected it for preservation in its United States National Film Registry.

Two considerations in this writing: the quality of “Midnight Cowboy” as an artistic expression; and an interpretation of three of its central themes. Back when I first saw the film, I didn’t think one iota about artistic merit and themes. I just went to whatever movie I happened to hear about and liked it or didn’t like it and that was that. Now, I want to see the finest films, which could turn out to be independent (not produced by a major film studio) or foreign, and I want to know who made them, and I want to have a reasonable understanding of what ideas and beliefs are coming at me so I can make a considered choice of what to do about them.

As for the quality of “Midnight Cowboy,” after viewing it carefully this week, I’ve concluded that it is a superb film, high up in the top rank as an artistic expression. The screenplay, direction, acting, cinematography, and editing—first class. Watching it this week (I wasn’t discerning enough to note this the first time around), I was very much taken with the cinematography of Adam Holender, who was around thirty at that time, young; truly remarkable, serves the film beautifully. “Midnight Cowboy” is not on a par with the very best films of that time, those by directors Ingmar Bergman,

Michaelangelo Antonioni, Yasujirō Ozu, and Robert Bresson (John Schlesinger, the director of “Midnight Cowboy,” isn’t quite in their league), but it’s top quality, very much worth my time and, I expect, yours. Consider this a recommendation that you see “Midnight Cowboy”; it’s widely available as a DVD and for streaming. One caveat with that recommendation: despite their artistic excellence, there are films I don’t go to because I don’t want to expose myself to what I understand to be their subject matter and messages, and after reading what’s here, you might want to stay clear of “Midnight Cowboy” on that basis. Personally, I was fine with encountering the content and perspectives in “Midnight Cowboy.” In fact, I felt enriched by my engagement with them.

I’ll leave the assessment of the artistic merits of “Midnight Cowboy” with that single paragraph because I want to focus primarily here on interpreting this film, surfacing what it cares most about and what it communicates about that.

To begin, I noted this time that there is a strong Jewish, gay, and left-leaning presence in “Midnight Cowboy.” The United Artists film company executive who green-lighted the film, David Picker, the producer Jerome Hellman, the director John Schlesinger, and the cinematographer Adam Holender were Jewish. Schlesinger was gay, as was James Leo Herlihy who wrote the source novel. Waldo Salt, who adapted Herlihy’s novel for the screen, was a long-time member of the Communist Party, took the Fifth Amendment in his appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee, and ended up blacklisted in Hollywood for a number of years.

I don’t want to *a priori* conclude that the men just listed were ill-intended, engaging in nefarious activity, attempting to subvert anything, or trying to do anybody in or bring them down. It’s possible that they were up to no good, but far more likely, I believe, they were, with every good intention, expressing their truths and singing their songs in the same way you and I express our truths and sing our songs. I think it is safe to assume that if all these individuals had been conservative heterosexual Pentecostals, “Midnight

Cowboy” would have been different than it was—or better, that these people would have made some other film. And that is a very important consideration indeed. Regardless of their motivations, what people insert into the flow of public discourse has consequences for how other people think and live. But the main point here, I don’t want to start with assumptions and then collect evidence to confirm and illustrate them. I want to see what’s actually in the film and go from there, keeping in mind that who I am and my beliefs and commitments will affect both what I single out for attention and what I make of it.

“Midnight Cowboy” operates on two levels in pretty much an even balance. There is the film’s narrative—what is going on in this moment, here and now. And, there are, frequently, regularly, interjected into this narrative, flashbacks and memories and fantasies and dreams; for shorthand, I’ll refer to any of that as a flashback. Watching the film again this time, I concluded that, most likely, the screenplay is a collaborative effort by credited screenwriter Waldo Salt and director John Schlesinger: Salt’s basic storyline and dialogue and Schlesinger’s uncredited flashbacks. The two men, and thus their two contributions, contrast significantly: Salt’s Marxist class consciousness and down-to-earth, gritty realism; and Schlesinger’s Freudianism, homosexual perspective, and aesthetic, non-literal, approach.

If I’m right about the contributions of these two men, they integrated their contrasting perspectives and concerns exceedingly well. Logically and thematically, “Midnight Cowboy” holds together very nicely—it could have been a mishmash and wasn’t. The elements of the film complement one another rather than clash. I’ve read that Salt and Schlesinger spent many months discussing the screenplay, and it shows. It’s clear from their end product that they were both very dedicated and very talented. They were aided in their efforts by Herlihy’s excellent novel. It provided strong support to Salt (many of the events and much of the dialogue in the film are taken straight from the book), as well as prompts for the (I believe) Schlesinger-created flashbacks.

Looking back on my life, I can see how the concerns and ideas and ideals of the 1960s that were “in the wind” in those years—a big part of which came from the popular culture, which included mass-marketed films like “Midnight Cowboy”—got through to me. They shaped how I thought and acted in both the private and public dimensions of my life. The problem, as I came to realize later, is that I wasn’t consciously, articulately, critically, aware of what I had unthinkingly internalized, and thus I wasn’t an autonomous, self-directed human being. I wasn’t my own person; I was somebody else’s person. I see myself as being my own person now, but I wasn’t then.

I’m doing with “Midnight Cowboy” what I wish I would have known to do in 1969: putting words to what’s in the film, making conceptual sense of it, including its implications and worth. A big reason I’m putting the time and effort into writing this up is to encourage you to do this same sort of thing with what is being pitched to you now in your life—this article is an example—so that someday you aren’t bearing in on eighty saying, “Damn, I wish I would have thought things through when there was still time and energy to do something about what I came up with.”

With that as a backdrop, I’ll provide illustrations of three central themes, or concerns, I picked up on in “Midnight Cowboy” going through it carefully this week: religion, sexuality, and male friendship. I’ve decided not to classify these illustrations as either part of the basic narrative of the film or an inserted flashback; I’ll leave it that everything below was on the screen. I’ve also decided to hold back on my take on any and all of this. I’ll do some of that (and please feel invited to critique it), but I want to leave room for you to make interpretations of your own.

So, three themes: religion, sexuality, and male friendship. See what sense you can make of what’s here.

Religion

On the bus to New York City, still in Texas, Joe has his transistor radio to his ear listening a gospel program called “The Sunshine Hour.” “Oh yes, sweet Jesus! I tell you, faith healin’. I got a letter here from a sister enclosing ten dollars.”

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In New York City, Joe is in a down-scale hotel room with a stranger named O’Daniel—fifties, short, bald, fleshy, wearing only a loosely tied bathrobe, an odd affect. Leering at Joe, he has him turn around so he can get a good look at him, pats Joe’s body.

Says O’Daniel, “Why don’t you and me get right down on our knees right now?” He opens the bathroom door to reveal, attached to the door, the toilet in view, an altar with a statue of Jesus. He falls to his knees. Joe is still standing. “I’ve prayed in the streets,” he raves, looking up at Joe. “I’ve prayed in the saloons. I’ve prayed in the toilets. It don’t matter where so long as He gets that prayer.”

“Shit!” Joe exclaims and bolts for the door to the outside.

Cut to ten-year-old Joe, looking frightened, being baptized, dunked in a lake or river by a tall, lean, rural-looking man, presumably a preacher, in a shirt and tie standing hip-deep in the water.

“No! Don’t run from Jesus!” implores O’Daniel.

As Joe nears the door, a pole with a sign attached that says “God is love” falls in his way. He frantically thrusts it aside and charges out of the room.

Cut to Joe running down the street as fast as he can go.

Sexuality

Joe around ten with his grandmother, Sally Buck. His young mother has given him over to Sally and left permanently. No father in sight; presumably Joe is illegitimate. Sally is sitting in one of her beauty salon chairs and Joe is massaging her neck from behind. She turns her head around and, holding the back of his neck, kisses him on the cheek and says, “That’s real nice, honey.”

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Young Joe in bed under the covers with Grandma. Smiling, she hugs him and kisses him on the cheek.

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Grandma to Joe, “You look nice, lover boy. Make your old grandma proud. You’re gonna be the best lookin’ cowboy in the whole parade.”

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Joe lying naked on his stomach, his grandmother spanking him hard and then setting up what appears to be an enema.

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Texas. Annie, around eighteen, dark brown hair, voluptuous, ripe. A pack of young men, twenty-years-old or so, which includes Joe, laughing, following her as she walks up a deserted street. She glances back at them—disdainfully? invitingly?

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A surreal setting, Annie running on sand; in the distance, young men chasing her. It appears to be the same pack, though I didn’t see a form that resembled Joe’s. I was reminded of a 1951 film, “Suddenly Last Summer,” which was based on a play by the gay playwright Tennessee William (who was a close friend of the author of the novel *Midnight Cowboy*, James Leo Herlihy). In “Suddenly Last Summer,” a young woman and her cousin are chased on a beach by a group of young men. She comes to realize that her cousin is using her to attract these young men in order to proposition them for sex. Eventually, the young men tear him apart and eat his flesh. The trauma of what occurred results in the young woman being committed to a mental institution. Perhaps this scene in “Midnight Cowboy” is paying homage to “Suddenly Last Summer.”

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At night. Joe and Annie having sex in a car, both naked, Joe on top of her. “Joe? Do you love me, Joe? You’re the only one.” A group of men—not the pack, older—yank open the car door and rape Annie and sodomize Joe.

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Joe with law enforcement officers in western hats, apparently arrested, accused by Annie of rape. “He’s the only one,” she says. Annie, deranged it appears, looks out of the back window of a car as she’s being driven away, perhaps to a mental institution. In the film, though not in the novel, she’s referred to as “Crazy Annie.” In the novel, Annie was put in a mental institution (as was the character in “Suddenly Last Summer”).

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Seated in a bar, Joe speaks to the person next to him.

“I’m Joe Buck from Texas.”

“I’m Enrico Rizzo from the Bronx.”

A transvestite intrudes to bum a cigarette from Joe and in the process, drops the fact that Enrico is known by another name (“Oh kiss it, Ratso, up yours”).

Ratso to Joe: “Got to watch out for these faggots. Faggot!”

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Ratso invites Joe to stay with him after Joe is kicked out of his room for failure to pay the rent.

Joe naps on a bare mattress. He wakes up with a start; his boots are off.

“How’d they get off me?” he shouts at Ratso.

“I took ‘em off. So you could sleep,” comes the quiet, calm reply.

“You after something. What you after? You don’t look like no fag. You want me to stay here. That’s the idea, ain’t it.”

“Look, I’m not forcing you.”

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Ratso tells Joe his cowboy outfit is “strictly for fags.”

“John Wayne?” Joe responds. “You’re going to tell me he’s a fag?”

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Ratso tells Joe, “My old man spent 14 hours a day in the subway. He’d come home at night, two, three dollars worth of change, stained with shoe polish. Stupid bastard coughed his lungs out from

breathin' in wax all day. Even the faggot undertaker couldn't get his nails clean."

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In desperate straits, Joe sells himself to a young male college student (or is it high school?) carrying his textbook. In a darkened movie theater, Joe remains motionless and stares straight ahead and looks stricken as the student snuggles up next to him, caresses him, and performs oral sex on him. The boy admits he was lying and doesn't have money to pay Joe. Joe manhandles him and threatens to take his watch. The student begs him not to take the watch ("My mother would die"). Joe walks away.

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Joe finally gets with a paying customer of the sort he envisioned in Texas. (To his fellow dishwasher—the only black in the film, street scenes included—just before he left Texas for New York City: "There's a lot of rich women back there, Ralph, beggin' for it. Payin' for it, too.") But Joe isn't up to the task. The woman, Shirley, 35, short dark hair, attractive, charming, says, "Well, it happens. Don't worry about it."

Looking forlorn, Joe replies, "It ain't never happened to me before."

Shirley suggests they play a board game called Scribbage, like Scrabble where you form words using tiles with letters on them. It's Joe's turn. "What the hell starts with 'Y'?"

"Well," offers Shirley, "it could *end* with 'Y.' "Like, uh, 'pay'. . . or 'lay.' Gay ends in 'Y.'" She sticks her finger in Joe's mouth. "Is that your problem, baby? You like that?"

"I'll show you my darn problem," says Joe, and rolls over on top of her. Shirley immediately reverses the position and gets on top of Joe. She snarls and bites and scratches him. It's rough sex, but evidently Joe comes through this time, because immediately afterwards, Joe standing there, she phones her friend and enthusiastically recommends him ("I'm not exaggerating. Listen, Margorie, you should try it") and sets up an appointment for her friend with Joe for the next Thursday evening at 8:30 p.m.

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Joe in a carnival shooting gallery, shooting at cowboys (at his recently adopted cowboy persona?). A man in late middle age, suit and tie, overcoat, scarf, clear-plastic-frame glasses, nondescript physical appearance, smiling, obsequious, introduces himself as Townsend P. Locke, in town for a paper manufacturer's convention. He invites Joe to dinner. As they walk toward the restaurant, Locke says, "Oh, damn it, we can't do that. I'm expecting a telephone call at the hotel."

In the hotel room, Locke speaks on the phone to his wife (he calls her "Mama").

"What you want?" demands Joe. "What you got me up here for?"

"Oh, Joe, it's so difficult. . . Oh, God, I loathe life. I loathe it. Please go. Please."

"You want me to leave?"

"No, I mean, yes, yes. Please go. Come back tomorrow. Promise?"

(The rest of the scene below.)

Male Friendship

Ironically, John Wayne, who is mentioned in "Midnight Cowboy" ("John Wayne? You're going to tell me he's a fag?"), won the Best Actor award in 1970 for his performance in "True Grit," beating out Hoffman and Voight. Wayne disparaged "Midnight Cowboy" as being about two homosexuals—a "what's the world coming to?" remark. Wayne's characterization reflected the consensus view at the time. To the extent that I thought about the film at all back then, that's the way I saw it too. But looking at it again, while there is a distinct homosexual overtone to film, it seems much more to be, at the most basic level, about male friendship.

Except for perhaps a couple of Ratso's long looks at Joe, I didn't pick up anything sexual between the two of them. They had no sexual contact in the novel, though the novel does have Joe, prior

to leaving Texas, engaging in homosexual acts. There is nothing in the film to suggest that Joe is a homosexual. I got the impression that Ratso is a latent, or repressed, homosexual, though he never came on to Joe. I understand that Schlesinger wanted a sex scene with the two of them but was talked out of it, and I can understand why. At its core, this film, as was Herlihy's novel, is about being alone and finding a friend, an ally. A sexual relationship between Ratso and Joe would have distracted from the central thrust of this story; plus, it simply wouldn't be true to these two characters.

The two of them set up house, so to speak, in the incredible squalor of Ratso's living—or is it dying?—quarters in the abandoned building. What an amazing film set; I didn't appreciate it the first time around.

Ratso cooks for the two of them, and cuts Joe's hair. Assessing a haircut, Ratso smiles warmly at Joe and says, "Not bad, for a cowboy. You're OK." Ratso steals a coat for Joe

Ratso in torn socks exposing his feet, sweating and coughing and getting sicker and sicker. It's the winter and no heat. Joe pawns his prized radio and sells his blood to buy Ratso new socks and Mentholatum (an ointment used to relieve aches and pains).

Upon seeing Joe and Ratso together, Shirley, Joe's one paying customer, inquired, "Are you two a couple?"

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One evening while cooking, Ratso says to Joe, "The two items necessary to sustain life are sunshine and coconut milk. In Florida, you got a terrific amount of coconut trees there. And ladies. You got more ladies in Miami than in any resort area in the country there. I gotta get out of here."

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Lying in bed, Ratso tells Joe, "Don't get sore or anything--"

"I ain't sore."

--I don't think I can walk anymore. I mean, I've been falling down a lot. I'm scared."

"What are you scared of?"

“You know what they do to you when they know you can’t—when they find out you can’t walk. Oh, Christ. I gotta lay down.”

“I’m gonna lay you down. I’m going to put this thing [an old blanket] over you.

‘Where you going?’

“I gotta get you a doctor.”

“No doctors, no cops. You get me to Florida.”

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The rest of the Townsend P. Locke scene, after Locke says, “Come back tomorrow. Promise?”:

“I’m going to Florida tomorrow.”

“That’s terrible. You meet someone you think—I want to give you a present . . . for your trip. Please take it.” He takes a chain with a Saint Christopher medal off his neck and hands it to Joe. “I want you to have it. You don’t have to be Catholic. Saint Christopher’s the patron saint of all travelers. I want you to have it for helping me be good.”

“I gotta have money.”,

“Yes, of course. Wait here.”

Locke goes to a table drawer and takes a bill out of his wallet and hands it to Joe. “Here. Don’t even thank me.”

“I gotta have more than ten. I gotta have \$57 [for the bus tickets].”

“I simply don’t have it, Joe.”

“I got family, goddamn it!”

“You’re wasting your time, Joe. There’s nothing in here [the wallet].”

“Get outta my way, please, sir.” Joe slugs Locke in the face.

Locke groans. “Oh, I deserve that. I brought this on myself, I know I did. My nose is bleeding, isn’t it?”

“Now are you going to let go of that table, or you want a busted skull?”

“Joe, Joe, Joe.”

Joe hits Locke with a vicious uppercut, knocking out his false teeth. Joe goes through Locke's wallet. He takes everything out of it and puts the thick wad of cash in his pocket.

Locke lying on the bed, face bloodied. "Oh, Joe. Thank you."

Locke reaches for the phone, puts the receiver to his ear. Joe takes note of it.

"No, no, I wasn't calling anyone."

Joe grabs the phone, rips the cord out of the wall, and then, with all his might, rams the receiver into Locke's toothless mouth.

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Joe and Ratso on the way to Florida, sitting together in a seat near the rear of the bus. Joe had to drag/carry Ratso to the bus and set him in the seat.

"If you're gonna shiver," Joe says to Ratso, "put your blankets up more."

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"Down there [in Florida], call me Rico."

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Ratso wets his pants. "Here I am, going to Florida, my leg hurts, my butt hurts, my chest hurts, my face hurts, and like that ain't enough, I got to pee all over myself."

"You just took a little rest stop that wasn't on the schedule," says Joe.

They share a laugh

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They arrive in Florida.

"What size pants you wear?" asks Joe.

Joe comes out of a store wearing regular clothes. He puts his cowboy clothes in a trash can.

On the bus, he puts a bright shirt on Ratso. "Yours was the only one with a palm tree on it."

"Thanks, Joe."

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The bus is nearing its final destination.

“Hey, you know, Ratso, I mean Rico, I got this damn thing figured out. When we get to Miami, what I’m goin’ to do is get some sort of job, you know? ‘Cause, hell, I ain’t no kind of hustler. I mean, there must be an easier way of making a livin’ than that. Some sort of outdoors work. What do you think?”

Ratso is dead in the bus seat. Joe puts his arm around him and holds him.