

## FIVE EASY PIECES (1970)

### Credits:

Cast: Jack Nicholson (Bobby Dupea), Karen Black (Rayette), Susan Anspach (Katherine), Lois Smith (Tina)  
Screenplay: Adrien Joyce  
Cinematography: Laszlo Kovacs  
Director: Bob Rafelson

### Background:

Five Easy Pieces was made by a small, independent production company, BBS, comprised of a loose confederation of Hollywood "outsiders"--Rafelson, Nicholson, Dennis Hopper, Peter Fonda, Warren Beatty, Bruce Dern, Warren Oates, Robert Towne--with serious artistic aspirations. It served to establish the career of Nicholson, already a Hollywood veteran of 15 years who had first scored in Hopper and Fonda's Easy Rider the year before.

The director, Bob Rafelson, might be compared to the film's protagonist, Bobby Dupea: a Dartmouth philosophy major and editor of the college's literary magazine, Rafelson fled his father's textile company and roamed the Southwest and Mexico, riding rodeo, playing jazz, and spending a few nights in jail. His career in Hollywood began years later when he founded and produced the Monkees; he eventually collaborated with Nicholson on two other films, The Postman Always Rings Twice (1981) and Man Trouble (1992).

### Stylistic Qualities:

Rafelson is generally an unobtrusive director, relying more on story-telling than striking cinematographic effects. Nevertheless, he occasionally employs truly striking artistic shots, as in the beautiful long shots of the oil fields or the exquisite tracking shot while Bobby plays the piano for Katherine, a kind of cinematic still-life. Note, too:

1. structure -- Rafelson employs the "road picture" genre recently revived by the success of Bonnie and Clyde and Easy Rider and continued in films like Badlands and Thelma and Louise. This is both a particularly American form (see Huckleberry Finn and Walt Whitman) and one particularly adaptable to the cinema's ability to depict surface action (e.g., Ford's excellent film of Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, Rafelson's own adaptation of Cain's The Postman Always Rings Twice).

2. incongruities -- Rafelson enjoys juxtaposing incongruous images as a way of reflecting the film's dialectical tension between establishment values and counter culture alternatives. Note, for example, the shot of Bobby playing a beat-up piano on the back of a pickup, the alternating scenes of the oil fields in long shot and the trailer camp in tight compositions and close-ups, or the musical sound track pitting Tammy Wynette against Chopin.

### Questions for Discussion:

1. Like Charles Foster Kane, Bobby Dupea is a man with enormous cultural advantages who wants to be loved by others but seems incapable of returning love. And like Kane, his character is somehow representative of the "American." Rayette calls him "about the moodiest man I've ever been with." Does the film offer a "Rosebud" that might help to explain his character?

2. How is Bobby's disaffection legitimized for the audience? Is he an anti-hero?

3. Is the film either misogynistic (woman-hating) or anti-intellectual?

4. This picture established Jack Nicholson as a star. Compare his character here with the movie persona he has developed in numerous vehicles over the past twenty years.

5. In what specific ways does the film reflect the conflicting values of its own time? Cite historical authorities rather than depending on your own cultural generalizations.