

**HEAD: a jubilant rampage through sixties psychedelia!**

RODGERS, Diane <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3117-4308>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/23116/>

---

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

**Citation:**

RODGERS, Diane (2017). HEAD: a jubilant rampage through sixties psychedelia!  
Cinema Retro, 37. [Article]

---

**Copyright and re-use policy**

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

*Head*: A psychedelic party fusing film and music in an irreverent take on old Hollywood

If there was ever a sixties film to make you want to strap on your go-go boots, climb inside it and crawl around for a while, it would be the irreverent psychedelic jigsaw that is *Head* (Bob Rafelson, 1968). In many respects (if you like The Monkees at least), this film is the ultimate psych-out party with groovy music, fashionable guests (cameo appearances include Victor Mature, Annette Funicello, Teri Garr, Frank Zappa, Timothy Carey, Dennis Hopper and Toni Basil amongst others), and a serious sense of hip satire, served up in a series of frenetic, LSD-infused, stream-of-consciousness sketches.

Debut film vehicle for wildly successful (manufactured) pop band The Monkees, following their eponymous hit TV show and with a string of no.1 albums hot on their heels, *Head* could hardly have been aimed in a more different direction than Columbia Pictures (or the band's expectant fan-base) might have desired. Originally named *Changes*, then *Untitled* before *Head*, the film was an antithesis to what the band's image and TV show had, until that point, represented. Mickey Dolenz, Davy Jones, Mike Nesmith and Peter Tork had managed to prove themselves more than just figureheads for a brand by writing and performing most of their own music on the (well received) 1967 album *Headquarters*. TV producers Bob Rafelson and Bert Schneider won the Emmy Award for Outstanding Comedy Series for *The Monkees* in 1967, in part based on the radical and unusual editing style they had developed, bringing a new tempo to TV comedy.

This success meant *Head* allowed them a chance to develop this further - a series of lightning-fast kaleidoscopic movie homages across only 85 minutes, with hardly a narrative thread between them, the film could easily be mistaken for something created by Andy Warhol, cut up by William S. Burroughs and reworked by Marshall McLuhan. Although it sounded the death knell for the pop sensation that had been The Monkees, it created a firm cult classic in its wake. For a work devoid of a clear story, it couldn't be more packed with content - it is, at turns, armchair philosophy ("Nobody ever lends money to a man with a sense of humour"), political commentary, concert film and self-reflexive media satire; with nods to genres including the war film, thrillers, spy dramas, romance, slapstick, the western and desert epics.

Director Rafelson, along with co-author Jack Nicholson, wanted to make an ambitious piece, experimenting with meaning and form (the script of *Head* reputedly structured whilst Nicholson was on LSD), displaying a healthy irreverence for the establishment and the audience themselves, whilst parodying as many classic film genres as possible. Thinking this his only opportunity to make a feature, Rafelson stated in *Sight and Sound*: "I might as well make fifty to start out with and put them all in the same feature." The filmmakers never intended *Head* for commercial success but as a satirical attack on the media industry of the late sixties, criticising the manipulation, worship and disproportionate success of popular artists of the day. Early in the film, the audience is teased with an overture-like chant over a dizzying array of images; twenty different scenes from the film appear one-by-one as individual TV screens within the frame. The lyrics suggest analysis of the content will be futile: "We hope you like our story, although there isn't one, that is to say there's many, that way there is more fun... for those who look for meanings and form as they do fact, we might tell you one thing but we'd only take it back!" ('War Chant').

The theme of escape is perhaps the only recurring thread of the film, the opening sees the band fleeing unseen pursuers, leaping suicidally from a suspension bridge to the water below, only to find themselves swimming with mermaids in a psychedelic dreamscape. The first of only six songs (other than 'War Chant') used in the film plays here, 'Porpoise Song' which only charted at no. 62 on original release, is now considered a classic piece of psychedelia. The choice of track is indicative of an intention to change the band's image; to metaphorically kill off their naïve pop personas and allow them to develop as serious artists in a world that was growing up fast. Not taking their fanbase lightly, though, the film shows awareness of the weight of responsibility that comes with popularity and influence; as Frank Zappa later suggests to Davy Jones the band should take their music more seriously: "...because the youth of America depends on you to show the way".

Throughout the film, the band continue trying to escape; whether crowds of screaming fans, the inside of a vacuum cleaner, the surrealistic 'Cop's Dream' sequence or, when Peter finally thinks he has found the philosophical path to enlightenment, the band ironically find themselves trapped inside a black box. The elliptical plot returns to the beginning; we see The Monkees flee the bridge once more, only this time there is no psychedelic dream, they are caught in a water tank, chained to the back of a truck (with a smug Victor Mature as their captor). The film itself is a kind of Möbius strip within which The Monkees are inexorably trapped.

Other than being a lyrical, labyrinthine trip, the film does have a pointed, political anarchy, directly drawing attention to western consumerist capitalist culture; the meat grinder that is the advertising industry and the way artists are treated within it. One scene finds The Monkees sucked into performing for an advert, confused and blinded by lights, they ask "Who are you? What is this?". They are given baffling directions to "jump around" by unseen producers; "You're supposed to be dandruff, fellas!": the band are unwitting puppets in a world focussed on sales. Other scenes are interspersed with TV channel flipping montages - cutting from Rita Hayworth to a Playtex bra advert to Vietnam war footage, children's cartoons, advertising billboards and back to The Monkees themselves, all levelled by the media, each simply another product on the shelf: "So make your choice and we'll rejoice in never being free!" ('War Chant').

A cyclical montage of car salesmen (each claiming "The world's largest Ford dealership") alongside an interview with (then) Governor Ronald Reagan, leads into what seems to be a Coca-Cola advert; few symbols represent the might of the American dollar to such an iconic degree as these. Establishment values are clearly subverted; here, Reagan, cut alongside used car salesman, shows authority depicted as outdated and mistrusted: one speaker in an irreverent vox pop montage asks, disbelievingly, "Are you telling me you don't see the connection between the Government and laughing at people?!" Later, a sweating, shirtless Dolenz struggles through a hot, dry, desert towards a Coke vending machine; literally dragging himself towards an icon of the American Dream in a vast desolate expanse. Upon inserting a coin, the machine mockingly flashes 'EMPTY' and Dolenz attacks it in despair whilst the overlaid jingle "Things go better with Coke" adds insult to injury. Shortly thereafter, a stream of armed European soldiers come upon the exhausted Dolenz, gleefully overjoyed to surrender to an "Americano!". This allows the filmmakers to neatly conclude their point, as a satisfied Dolenz uses the soldiers' abandoned tank to blow the Coke machine to smithereens.

Rafelson also wanted to expose the manufactured production process itself; the form and editing of the film are overtly foregrounded with a unbridled exuberance - fast paced cutting, solarising colour effects, psychedelic light sequences, inclusion of TV, film, news and documentary footage, on-screen text and inter-titles. One particularly impressively sequence 'Daddy's Song' seems to have been made with a sense of joyous revelry in the sheer act of splicing. Davy Jones and Toni Basil dance together, wearing black and white evening wear, placed against a plain white set; a scene that wouldn't be amiss in a Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly movie. What makes this remarkable, however, is that the entire scene has been filmed again with well-matched performances in negative; white and black evening wear, plain black set, both versions expertly cut together in a fast paced rapidity creating a flashing stroboscopic frenzy (no mean feat in the days of film splicing!).

In this sense, *Head* is a work of pure cinema; perhaps even one of the most subversive and radical films ever produced within Hollywood itself. Described as a flawed masterpiece, Mike Nesmith, quoted in G.A. Baker's 'Monkeeman' saw *Head* as one of their greatest achievements, of which he was "...profoundly proud...A sophisticated film made by sophisticated film-makers". It is impossible to imagine *Head* translated to any medium other than film; one colour-solarised sequence shows Mike drifting, in slow-motion, into a Warhol-like Factory environment where the most psychedelic of sixties freak-out parties is taking place. One of The Monkees' grooviest dance-floor songs 'Long Title: Do I Have to do This All Over Again?' is accompanied by the most rapid-paced cutting yet, depicting light shows, projections, overlays, mirrors, go-go dancers, documentary footage, psychedelic colour and visual effects. The scene has a vibrant, contagious, party atmosphere where we see Davy, Peter and Mickey themselves getting down and throwing shapes amongst the thronging dancers.

Against this, however, we see the construct of the film itself; behind-the-scenes lighting rigs, Rafelson operating a camera amongst the crowd, and Nesmith, rather than revelling in the party, just wants to be left alone: "I don't like it!". Another Western-inspired scene shows Mickey brushing fake arrows from his cavalry uniform "I don't wanna do this anymore man, these fake arrows...and the fake trees, Bob I'm through", he breaks the fourth wall by speaking to the director behind the camera and storms off, tearing a hole in the giant canvas backdrop. Dolenz said, in an interview with *The Guardian*: "...that was a metaphor for people being fed up with the studio system." The film lays bare the nuts and bolts of the production process, and disillusionment that comes with it. The end of another scene takes this further still; the camera continues to roll as Rafelson calls "cut" and crew swarm the set, some primping Peter's hair and costume for another take, others asking for autographs, whilst he questions Rafelson on the motives of his 'character': "Bob, it's a movie for kids, they're not gonna dig it man...it's for the image". Again, attention is directed to the constructed image not only of the film but also The Monkees themselves.

Despite the raft of talent behind it, *Head* was a flop, at least in terms of what might have been expected from any such teeny pop star-vehicle, misunderstood and light years ahead of its time. *Head* may have made the careers of some, like Rafelson and Nicholson, but was the point of no return for others; record sales were dwindling and the band members left behind struggled with their identity, officially breaking up shortly afterward (although not until after a Monkees TV special, perhaps even more critical, psychedelic and surrealistic than *Head*). Contemporary reviews of the film varied wildly from being "Like 8 ½ made by a flower child" (*Cue* magazine) to "A commentary on our times..." (*New York Daily News*) to "...the kind of material... that the Monkees have already worn out on television, only much worse..." (Pauline Kael). Peter Tork, more recently interviewed in *The Guardian*, summed up the response to the film: "The simile of a rock in the water is too mild for how badly that movie did."

*Head* lives on today, however, an eminently re-watchable and firm cult favourite because of its sheer stubborn refusal to conform; to one clear genre, to any kind of straightforward narrative or expectation. Because it incorporates almost every film genre under the sun with a cheerful, exuberant irreverence and cheeky playful spirit, knowingly crafted with experimental aesthetics; rather than a sinking stone, *Head* is like a fluttering, psychedelic, butterfly. It is all things groovy, intelligent and fun about the 1960s; an infectious giggle you'd like to hear again and again and again.

*Head* is widely available on DVD and Blu-Ray

## SOURCES

Russell Taylor, J. (1976) 'Staying Vulnerable', *Sight and Sound*, October, v45, n4

Baker, G.A. (1997) *Monkeemania*, Plexus Publishing Ltd., London, p.93

Lynskey, D. (2011) 'The Monkees' Head: 'Our fans couldn't even see it', *The Guardian*, 28 April, [online at <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/apr/28/monkees-head-jack-nicholson-interview>]