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To what extent do *A Hard Day's Night* and *Easy Rider* function as counter-cultural texts within their respective cultures?

**“To what extent do ‘A Hard Day’s Night’ and ‘Easy Rider’ function as counter-cultural texts within their respective cultures?”**

IB Extended Essay

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## ABSTRACT

Both films *A Hard Day's Night* and *Easy Rider* are well remembered for their expression and depiction of the values and perceptions of youth in their respective cultures. They were both produced during pivotal periods in history (London's Swinging Sixties, and America's counterculture period), which involved dramatic social, ideological, political and cultural changes that heavily influenced the youths' position in society today.

This essay seeks to identify what particular stylistic, semiotic, and representative characteristics of the films contribute to their overall functions as a counter-cultural text, and how the films use genre, themes and existing iconography to challenge the ideals of their respective mainstream culture, thus leading to the answer of the research question: "To what extent do 'A Hard Day's Night' and 'Easy Rider' function as counter-cultural texts within their respective cultures?"

The historical, social, economical and cultural backgrounds of each film were researched in order to enable a good understanding of the context, and each text was studied in further detail through textual analysis in relation to their context. Sources used include online sources such as <http://articles.latimes.com/> and <http://books.google.com/>, documentaries such as *Shaking the Cage* (1999), DVD resources such as the films and additional materials and interviews, as well as text resources such as the book *Easy Riders and Raging Bulls* (Peter Biskind, 1998), *Risky Business* (R. Serge Denisoff and William D. Romanowski, 1991) and articles from various magazine and newspaper articles such as *The Independent* and *The Sunday Herald*.

At the end of the study, it was concluded that *Easy Rider* clearly carries many characteristics of a countercultural text, and *A Hard Day's Night*, although somewhat watered down in comparison to *Easy Rider*, still functions as a countercultural text, in a more general sense.

Word Count: 297

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## INTRODUCTION

The research topic for this essay is “To what extent do the films ‘A Hard Day’s Night’ and ‘Easy Rider’ function as countercultural texts in their respective cultures?”

Counterculture is a cultural movement that work against that of the mainstream political, cultural and social ideologies at the time. I have carried out this research while keeping aware that there are many definitions to what counterculture is, and that the films that I have analyzed may or may not require similar or varying interpretations of the term ‘counterculture’. Counterculture can be the term used to describe a prominent movement that is a collaborative result of expression through many different aspects of society and culture such as the arts, lifestyle and values, but can also be applied as a general term used to describe much subtler ideas and attitudes toward a particular social aspect.

I have chosen this topic because I had genuine interest in the culture and history of the 60’s counterculture era, partly due to my strong appreciation and interest in the band *The Beatles*.

I am also aware that while *Easy Rider* is easily recognized as “An Anti-establishment classic” (*Lucia Bozzola*<sup>1</sup>) and that “a classic of the counterculture, and American culture in general.” (*David Poscovitz*<sup>2</sup>, 2007), *A Hard Day’s Night* is seldom labelled as a countercultural text. However, I believe that if I identify the subtle themes of defiance and criticisms of British society that can be found in *A Hard Day’s Night*, I will be able to find characteristics that will lead me to conclude that *A Hard Day’s Night*, in its own context, can be considered to function as a countercultural text.

For *Easy Rider*, it can be expected that many of the themes, symbolisms and iconoclasm portrayed will be overtly countercultural, as the film had been produced in the height of the 60’s American counterculture era; 1969 was the year that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, was the year that held the Woodstock Music festival and was also the year of the March Against Death in Washing D.C.. *Easy Rider* is essentially a satirical view of conformist America through the exploitation of the traditionally american western genre.

The essay will examine each text by identifying the major themes of each film, relate it to their the social, cultural and institutional contexts and proceed to support each argument with evidence from detailed textual analysis and wherever possible, find a point of comparison between the two films that either support or challenge the direction of my argument.

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Both *Easy Rider* and *A Hard Day’s Night* were known for their innovation, energetic pace, strong and controversial statements, explorations with the taboo and critiques of society in their time. Both films notably reflect their current state and period of time, exploit and alter existing iconographies of genres to convey a sense of change, use music and soundtrack that

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reflect the youth culture and have editing styles that are quite unconventional. These are all characteristics of films that function as countercultural texts.

## CONTEXT

The 60's were a period of drastic changes to culture and society, especially for the youth. In Britain, the economic boom left the postwar babies with a significant amount of disposable income, and the young working class Britons were able to afford and adopt lifestyle of their own. With the emergence of teddy boys, ton-up boys, rockers and mods, it became evident that a new culture had risen out of the ashes of WW2. "*The Mod subculture grew up in defiance of the staid containment of the Fifties. Teenagers had now been invented and suddenly working class kids could afford to buy (on hire purchase) trendy little Italian scooters such as Vespas and Lambrettas, plus shiny mohair or wool suits, loafer shoes and button-down collar shirts.*" (Brian Beacom<sup>3</sup>, 2009)

In the early 60's, 'after years of playing the sleaziest clubs in Hamburg and Liverpool' (Laurie Edwards<sup>4</sup>, 2002), a band named The Beatles was discovered and swiftly rose to fame. Inevitably, the idea of producing a film featuring the Beatles was quick to present itself. *A Hard Day's Night* was the first of the five films that featured the Beatles. Directed by Richard Lester, Produced by Walter Shenson and Written by Alun Owen, the film turned out to be a huge commercial success, and still remains to be one of the most critically acclaimed films of the sixties, taking 5th place in the 'Best of Rotten Tomatoes' list<sup>5</sup>. *A Hard Day's Night* was the product of the ideas of power to the working class, of the 'rags to riches' mentality, and of the newly emerging ideals to society that became an integral part of the 'Swinging London' era.

A little further down the timeline, the youth of America were also experiencing a substantial change of their own. The post WW2 baby boomer generation had grown up<sup>6</sup> in wealth and abundance, and with more time and money to spend, turned to music, drugs and peace activism. America was split between the older right wing conformist generation, who had fought the war and raised their children in the best environments, and the younger left wing liberalist generation, most of whom opposed the war in Vietnam with great passion, and sought a life of liberty and self expression. When Producer Peter Fonda first shared his idea with Director, Dennis Hopper, what they had in mind was a "Modern Western."<sup>7</sup> *Easy Rider* was all about the conflict between the two political ideals, and was heavily critical of the intolerance that America showed towards their new ideals and lifestyles, and that this very fact was contradicting what America truly stood for: freedom. *It was tale of a search for freedom (or the illusion of freedom) in a conformist and corrupt America, in the midst of paranoia, bigotry and violence.*<sup>8</sup>

## GENRE EXPLOITATION

One notable similarity between the films that are being studied herein is that both have borrowed many conventions, ideologies and styles of recognizable pre-existing genres, and altered them to convey the idea of change.

*A Hard Day's Night's* raw style of cinematography, slice-of-life narrative unmistakably reminds us of documentaries, while its cinema verite style of editing is reminiscent of the British New Wave, as though presenting a more optimistic and youthful twist to the kitchen-sink drama trends in British cinema in the early sixties.

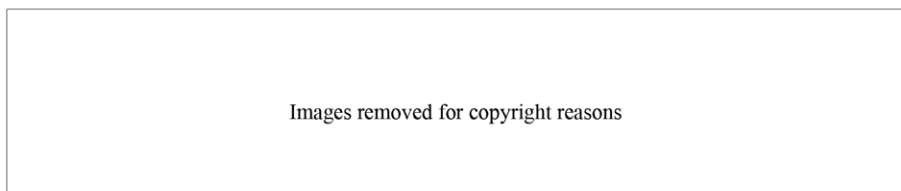
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In this way, the stylistic allusions to the British New Wave (stylistically very similar to the French New Wave) gives a sense of transition and change, and does not merely reveal the conflicts between the working and middle class, but expresses a hope and defiance that the youth can and will hold the power and place in society that they rightfully deserve. Neil Sinyard<sup>a</sup> wrote, “(Lester’s films) came in on the wave of that mood, expressing the cockiness and confidence of a new generation that was no longer intimidated by class and no longer awed by society’s symbols of authority and power.”<sup>9</sup>

Although the film roughly adopted the visual style of the British New Wave, notable differences from the typical British New Wave films indicated that the film was not entirely following the same movement. Surrealism replaced stark realism, an optimistic and subversive attitude replaced the tragic resignation of kitchen-sink heroes. It brought a certain vitality and lighthearted liveliness to an otherwise serious and gritty style of cinema.

Surrealism is a prominent part of this film, and can be found in many scenes. Richard Lester points out: “The sense that there was a slightly surreal element to the film was something that was very important to try to get in...because that did seem to be something that nobody had been doing...to say to the audience, ‘Things are not quite what they seem to be’.”<sup>10</sup>

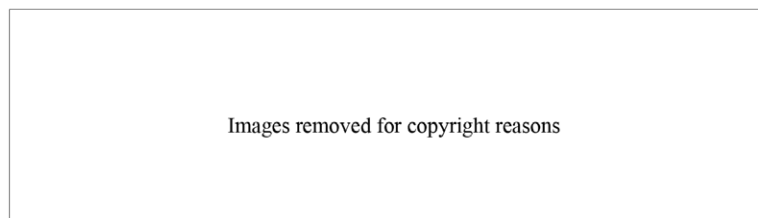
The surrealism, although quite discreet, can be found many moments throughout the film. Some examples include: when the boys suddenly appear outside of the cabin, cycling to catch up with the train, when the boys suddenly cut from playing cards to singing “I Should Have Known Better”, when there are scenes that visually convey a sense of surrealism, and when different stage performers in the television studio ‘meet’ at a certain point. Richard Lester explains: “There’s a very glib definition of surrealism in that surrealism is a point in which two concentric circles of reality meet.”<sup>11</sup>



*Outside the cabin*

*Sudden musical moment*

*Visually conveys Surrealism*



*“Surrealism is a point in which two concentric circles of reality meet.”*

In *Easy Rider*’s case, the film draws very strong allusions to the western genre. The western is regarded as a very traditionally American genre, as it is bound to the history and location of America. Therefore as the conventions and iconography of this genre was exploited to create an

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entirely different idea of what American society should be, the message became much clearer. As the slogan for the film goes: "A man went looking for America, and couldn't find it anywhere." By symbolically making it evident that Billy and Wyatt are examples of what Dennis Hopper thought true Americans should think and live like, and Hopper's ideals essentially reflected the ideals of the youth, wanting to produce a film that the youth can relate to and had more relevance to the reality of the sixties, as Hopper explains: "*There had been no movies made that had anything to do with our reality, and the movie that was made the year that we made Easy Rider was Doris Day and Rock Hudson made pillow talk, and the young kind of movies were being made for kids were Beach Blanket Bingo, you know, with Frankie Avalon. They had very little to do with the reality of the hippy love ins.*"<sup>12</sup>

Images removed for copyright reasons

Both characters' costumes and props suggest the image of modern-day cowboys, riding on Harley Davidson motorcycles instead of horses across boundless and never-ending highways, sleeping in the wilderness around campfires. Their names in themselves are reminiscent of American western outlaw heroes 'Billy the Kid' and 'Wyatt Earp'. They are not searching for new frontiers, but rather for a new America, for liberty, and the perfect place for them to stay in their retirement.

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There are many moments when it becomes very apparent that the conventions of western genre is being juxtaposed with the bikers. In the scene where they arrive at a ranch to replace tires, there is a direct juxtaposition between the shoeing of a horse and the changing of the wheel tire.

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The more easily the connections between the western genre and the film is made, the easier it would be to understand the significance of the idea of changing old America to a new America. To incorporate the iconography of a very traditionally American genre and exploiting it to create an iconoclasm is certainly an example of a countercultural function.

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### GENERATIONAL CONFLICT/RESISTANCE TO AUTHORITY

In *A Hard Day's Night*, the call for change and resistance to authority is a lot subtler than it is in *Easy Rider*. The train cabin sequence of *A Hard Day's Night* is prominent for its straightforward way of expressing the idea of the power of the working class.

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While on the train to the studio, a pompous middle-aged man enters the cabin and gives a band a rude, disdainful look in response to their greetings.

The awkwardness and tension between the two generations are built through cutting back and forth between the man and the boys' faces. He pulls down the armrest as though it would separate himself from the boys.

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The newspaper that the man is holding seems to act like a barrier against the boys. It is a kind of status symbol that defines his education and class, and when he feels that he is losing his argument with the boys (about closing the window), he simply returns to reading the newspaper, as though his 'superior knowledge' (portrayed by the newspaper) would compensate for his inability to win the argument with the boys.

As the arguments between the people in the cabin escalates to a debate about rights, Paul exclaims:

*There's more of us than you.  
We're a community, majority vote, up  
the workers and all that stuff.*<sup>13</sup>

This is clearly a strong statement about the rising power of the working class on behalf of the youth of Britain.

John's sarcastic comments and George and Ringo's retorts show that the boys are not intimidated by the authority of the middle-class man.

*Knock it off, Paul, y' can't win with his sort.  
After all, it's his train, isn't it, Mister?*<sup>14</sup>



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Undaunted by the patronizing and authoritative tone of the veteran, John confidently carries out what would have been considered outrageous behavior in the time before the rise of the generational conflict.

The less the boys' attitudes become respectful, the more they dominate the screen and are positioned to surround the man. At times, the shots are not cut, but moved swiftly between Paul, the man and John using handheld camera. This positions the audience in the perspective of the two Beatles seated on the opposite side, and thus feel empathy for the boys and feel alienated from the man.

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The Beatles carried with them the image of insuppressible energy and optimism, "*They have a marvelous quality of disrespect.*"<sup>15</sup> said Walter Shenson, the producer of *A Hard Day's Night*, and this 'marvelous quality' about them had to be transferred directly into the film in its purest form, unhindered by a pressure to create a cleaner image.

In *Easy Rider* too, we can find some generational and political conflicts in scenes such as the cafe scene where the men in the cafe insult them indirectly but intentionally loudly so that the 'troublemakers' could hear. There is a direct contrast between the reaction of the younger girls and the older men to the presence of the bikers, and we can see the three walk in the door in the mirror reflection as the men and girls talk.

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Another example would be the graveyard LSD trip scene. The frantic, emotional speeches of Wyatt expresses a certain anger towards his mother, and distance from his father.

The scene with Wyatt sobbing resentful questions at his mother while seated atop the lap of a statue of the Madonna (Which Hopper called "*the italian statue of liberty.*"<sup>16</sup>) not only conveyed Peter Fonda's personal feelings about his mother's suicide, but also symbolized the anger and resentment Wyatt felt towards America.

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## SEX AND TABOOS

Although the sex and drug references in the film seem quite mild, they are surely not hidden or shunned, and the film can be seen as a milder precursor to the more sexually adventurous and violent 'Swinging London' films that were to follow, such as *Darling*, (1965) and *Blow Up*, (1966).

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copyright reasons

*Blow Up* (1965)

However, as the film was produced just before the Swinging London really started taking shape in British society and influencing the mainstream British cinema, it simply reflects the transitional period where the youth were gaining confidence and changing their views about sex, money, authority and recreation.

Neil Sinyard wrote, "*(Lester's films) came in on the wave of that mood, expressing the cockiness and confidence of a new generation that was no longer intimidated by class and no longer awed by society's symbols of authority and power.*"<sup>17</sup>

There are certain moments of sexual tension in the film as The Beatles members encounter attractive dancers, showgirls and actresses within the cramped environment of the studio or train (*environments deliberately chosen by Richard Lester for their low ceilings and claustrophobic interiors*)<sup>18</sup>, such as the scene where George walks into a marketing office to find a secretary, who is presented particularly in the male gaze, and the instance where Ringo was flirted on by an older woman on the train.

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*George plays around with showgirl's strap / In the perspective of the male gaze / Lady on the Train*

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Some drug references were made, and in one particular scene, John 'snorts' his bottle of coke as a double entendre for 'cocaine'. Mainly sexual references and humor can be found in the dialogue, with examples including John's exclamation: "*Please sir, may I have one to surge with sir?*"<sup>19</sup> and Paul's accusation to Ringo: "*It's all your fault...He's probably in the middle of some orgy by now!*" (*the boys run out of the room in excitement*)<sup>20</sup>

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The Film's rating at the time ranged from 'G' to 'PG' which showed that the references were quite inoffensive and dismissible. Britain had become a lot more liberal to taboos on screen, and *A Hard Day's Night* appropriately followed and reflected that change in attitude.

As for *Easy Rider*, it is much easier to see that taboos were broken quite shamelessly. Not only were the actors method acting with real marijuana, there was full nudity, appearance of prostitutes as well as issues about drug dealing and violent political conflicts within society. As a major film, it was very radical in terms of the way it presented the ideas of freedom and the values of the sixties youth, being very direct and unapologetic in its statement about the reality and the falsehood of the American dream.

### SYMBOLISM

The sense of lost patriotism, the irony that is of America's true intentions and the reality of the intolerance of the immovable conservative population of the sixties is expressed in the film through the use of symbolism and portrayal of character.

In the film, the ACLU lawyer, George Hansen (Jack Nicholson) summarizes the emotion of the film with a single line: "*This used to be a hell of a good country. I can't understand what's gone wrong with it.*"<sup>21</sup>

George himself was a character that helped show the extent of violence people in America still showed towards 'long hairs', the very problem of American society that this film seeks to reveal. As Peter Fonda explains, "*It was tough-but Jack had to die...*"<sup>22</sup>

"*I wanted America to kill their own son,*" said Dennis Hopper. "*...in fact we didn't need to be different, we didn't need to be black-we just needed to have long hair.*"<sup>23</sup>

The American flag is used in many props and scenes in the film, but it is most notably used to decorate Wyatt's Motorcycle.

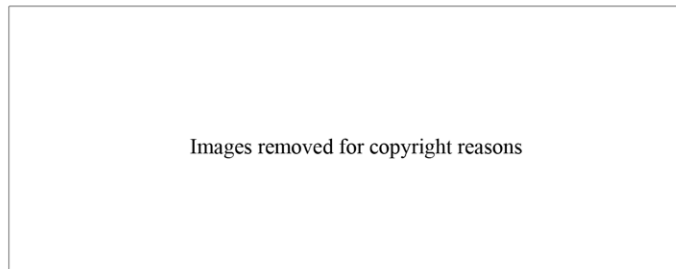
Peter Fonda comments on the symbolism of the gas tank: "*When you see that tube going into the gas tank, I'm stuffing money into it, what's the symbol for you on that? 'Fuckin' the flag with money.*"<sup>24</sup>

The Bike was also a statement about America's obsession with earning money, corporate evil, the society's refusal to accept a new way of life, and how all these faults will only lead to ruin. "*Captain America's Great Chrome bike- that beautiful machine covered with stars and stripes with all the money in the gas tank is America-and that any moment we can be shot off it-BOOM-explosion-that's the end,*"<sup>25</sup> explains Dennis Hopper

The destruction of the bike in the end symbolizes the destruction of America; the right-wing American society (represented by the two rednecks on the truck) had led America to an end.

*Easy Rider* also presents a clear anti-war statement in the death scene of Billy and Wyatt. When Billy died, Wyatt took off his jacket and placed it over his face, the gesture for a soldier's death. The last shot of the film is the helicopter shot-a reminder of the helicopters that were used in Vietnam at the time, and the ongoing war was a huge issue of protest amongst the young hippies at the time, and the protests against the war is a huge presence in the history of sixties counterculture. "*Their opposition to the Vietnam War became one of the most significant aspects of the growing antiwar movement throughout the latter half of the 1960s.*"<sup>26</sup>

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*Helicopter Shot*

*A Soldier's Death*

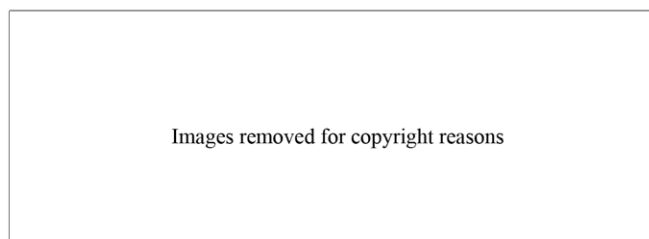
### MUSIC AND SOUNDTRACK

In both films, the music and soundtrack plays a very significant role in the narrative. In *Easy Rider*, the music, while not being part of the action of the narrative unlike *A Hard Day's Night*, was relevant to what was happening on the scene and added commentary to the scene when no character was speaking. A notable scene where music was used is the ironic use of Steppenwolf's *God Damn the Pusher* when Wyatt was placing the money into the teardrop gas tank right after scoring big on the cocaine deal. Music was a huge part of the sixties counterculture, as it was a means of personal and political expression. The film included songs by Jimi Hendrix as well as other countercultural icons.

The soundtrack of *A Hard Day's Night* is comprised of songs that The Beatles had written specifically to perform in the film. The genre of The Beatles music was Rock n' Roll at the time of the film, and Rock n' Roll was considered music for the young, and therefore appealed to the younger generation, again reinforcing the idea of the growing youth culture.

### THE EDITING STYLE

Both films show a distinctly European influence, especially of the French New Wave and the cinema verite style. Peter Fonda described *Easy Rider* as: "*cinema verite in allegorical terms.*" "*The French New Wave directors had dispensed with traditional optical effects like dissolves, fades, and so on...but their absence created a different aesthetic, gave their films a documentary flavor and speeded up the pacing.*"<sup>27</sup>



*Intercutting between these two scenes was used as a transition.*

As for *A Hard Day's Night*, the influences of the French New Wave can be found in "*Lester's immoderate interest in technical tricks-Sped-up action, Multiple exposures, eccentric angles, tricky masking and so on,*" (*The London Times*)<sup>28</sup>

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As the executive producer of the film, David Picker described that “*it was such an anti-hollywood type movie...the talking into the camera...the irreverence of it... the movie is really a very unusual experience, and certainly breaks every rule.*”<sup>29</sup>

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## THE CONCLUSION

After examining the social, cultural and historical context of each film and identifying the defining characteristics that contribute to the film’s’ function as countercultural texts, I have found that my anticipations about the extent to which the films functioned as countercultural texts were moderately accurate, in that *A Hard Day’s Night* expressed some subtle criticisms about British Society in a way that can be considered countercultural in a general context, while *Easy Rider* was predictably very openly countercultural. It should be noted that though, seen from another, more narrowly defined perspective, *A Hard Day’s Night* was hardly countercultural at all, due to the fact that The Beatles always reluctantly obeyed the orders from the authority.

However, given that the definition of counterculture is broad, it can be said that both films function as countercultural texts, albeit for different reasons.

While *Easy Rider* drew many parallels to the reality of the sixties culture at the time, it was not a completely naturalistic representation of reality, due to the heavy symbolism and allusions to the western genre. The film itself functioned as a counterculture text at an institutional level, as the film is widely noted to be one of the few commercially successful independent films that opened the doors to new Hollywood.<sup>35</sup>

*A Hard Days Night* also functions as a countercultural text in its own way, although in a much milder way in comparison to the rebellious nature of *Easy Rider*. Its naturalism reflects trends and the general atmosphere of sixties Britain and the reveals the beginnings of the swinging sixties era, and the film also sends an optimistic message to the working class youth about their power and rights. The music reflected pop culture at the time, and the rule-breaking nature of cinematography and editing made it that much more innovative and bold in its nature.

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| Footnotes     |      |   |
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