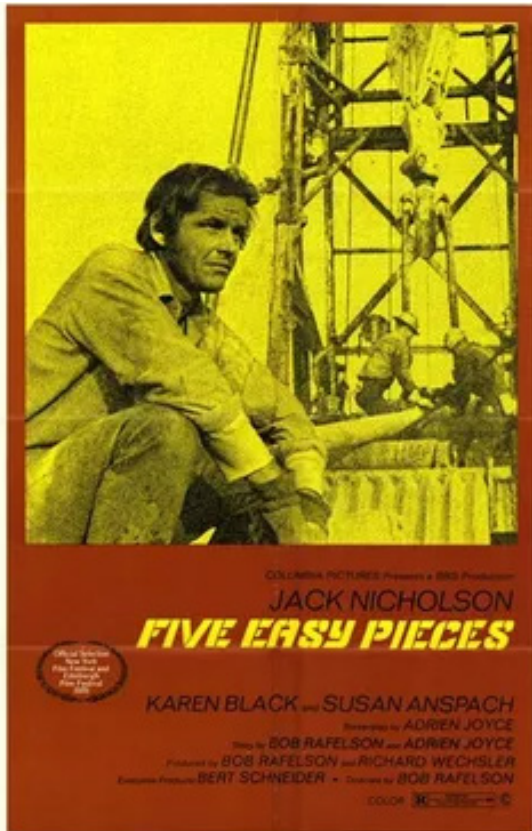


smARTfilms

darkness at noon

***Five Easy Pieces* (1970) film notes by Tova Gannana**



In a traffic jam on a California highway, Robert Dupea (Jack Nicholson) climbs on a truck bed where he uncovers a fellow travelers piano. He sits down and plays. He is a pianist but doesn't practice. For now a roughneck, Robert was born an islander in the San Juans. In California, he is "Bobby." The truck drops him off in a town with storefronts pastel colored like the surrounding desert. Neon signs glow as the sky loses its colors. Bobby works in an oilfield that looks like a set of grand pianos clustered on a stage. In a small house with green carpeting, Bobby lives with Rayette Dipesto (Karen Black), a waitress who has a habit of sitting on bathroom sinks and smoking while she stares into the mirror, fixing her hair.

Five Easy Pieces (1970) opens with the sounds of oilfields, with Bobby on a forklift shoveling dirt. As the field lights go on, the sky fading into purple then almost black, Tammy Wynette sings a line from her famous song, "Sometimes it's hard to be a woman." Bobby comes home with a six-pack, Rayette is playing Wynette's song like it's a message. Bobby tells her, "If you play that record one more time I'm going to melt it down into hair spray." No matter what she wears, Rayette looks like a waitress. She goes to bed and wakes up in makeup; her lips frosted, her hair curled. Rayette wants from Bobby what she wants from life, "I'll go out with you, I'll stay in with you.

Or I'll do anything that you'd like me to do as long as you tell me that you love me." Like the discipline of being a classical pianist that Bobby doesn't have, he also lacks the character to be in a loving relationship. He is the kind of man sung about in country songs. Rayette living her own song, says to him, "All I'm asking is for you to help me improve my musical talents." Bobby is not a roughneck or a pianist, he is "a nothing." He acts like it, towards himself and others.

"Isn't he pretty?" Rayette says of Bobby at the bowling alley. They are on a team and she keeps striking out. Bobby picks on her and then in front of her picks up two girls. "I guess I'll go wait in the car," Rayette says. Though she is tall in stature, Rayette, like her name, is diminutive. The counter at the diner where she works is sunken, child height. She looms over Bobby as he sits in front of his coffee. Bobby has been gone again all night with his roughneck friend Elton (Billy Bush) singing nursery rhymes with the girls from the bowling alley.



Bobby visits his sister Tita (Lois Smith) in L.A. He finds her in a recording studio at a piano. “How is everyone on the island?” he asks her. “Robert,” as Tita calls him, has been gone three years, no letters, just disappeared. What Bobby says to Rayette he is also saying to himself, “Come on Dipesto, I never told you it would work out to anything.” His father is sick on the island in the San Juans, and Bobby is heading out to see him. Rayette comes along as far as the Washington mainland. She will stay there in a motel until she runs out of money and arrives by taxi at his father’s house two weeks later.

Looking backward as the island grows closer, Bobby rides the ferry alone. In his father’s house family portraits hang on the walls like notes on a sheet of music, part of a whole piece. Music plays; it feels like the house is playing music the way Rayette plays her records, the music resounding throughout her house. Bobby looks in a room where two pianists are facing one another, his brother Carl (Ralph Waite) and his student Catherine (Susan Anspach). Neither of them notices Bobby. Bobby has come upon a world so complete. His father at the end of his days, having suffered a stroke, has no more words left to speak. Tita is embroiled with her father’s male nurse; Carl is engaged to his protegee Catherine. Rayette, done whiling away in the motel, then shows up embarrassing Bobby during dinner at his father’s house. Bobby is aimless among them and aiming to disrupt them. Catherine who looks a lot like Rayette but with clear eyes, says to Bobby, “If a person has no love for himself, no respect for himself...how can he ask for love in return?”



Bobby takes his father in a wheelchair out to the field and tries to come to some understanding. The sky above is setting, growing darker. Kneeling in front of his father, Bobby says, “I don’t know if you’d be particularly interested in hearing anything about me. My life, most of it doesn’t add up to much that I could relate as a way of life that you’d approve of. I move around a lot not because I’m looking for anything really but because I’m getting away from things that get bad if I stay.” Bobby continues, “The best that I can do is apologize. We both know that I was never really that good at it anyway.” Bobby looks at his father; he is looking to see himself.



In the 1930s and '40s, “talent” was a word that meant something. If you had talent you went places, Hollywood, New York City. You left the islands, the midlands of the country and went to the coasts where you could be seen. The films of that time reflected and rewarded talent. *Five Easy Pieces* is about a man who wants none of it not because he is brave or wise but because he is numb. It is 1970 and too much has happened in America.

Bobby looks at himself in the mirror in a men’s room at a gas station after he leaves his father’s house without saying goodbye. His hands on either side of his reflection, as though he could love himself and in return be loved, but he turns away and walks out. He can’t be himself so who can he be?



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JUNE 25

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July 16 - **THE GUILTY**

Winner - National Board of Review, SIFF & Sundance Film Festival

July 23 - **HUKKLE**

Winner - San Sebastian Film Festival & Paris Film Festival

July 30 - **CAPERNAUM**

Winner - 2018 Cannes Film Festival Grand Jury Prize

August 6 - **SITA SINGS THE BLUES**

Winner - Berlin International Film Festival