

Reappraising the Renaissance

The New Hollywood in Industrial and Critical Context

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis offers a reappraisal of the “New Hollywood” of the late 1960s and early 1970s that aims to move beyond the currently accepted reductive historical models. It challenges many of the assumptions underlying prevailing accounts of the period, including the makeup of the orthodox “canon” of New Hollywood movies, the time frame within which the movies were contained, and the role played by the critical establishment in determining the ways in which the movies of the period were understood. Bringing together industrial context, textual analysis and critical (re)interpretation, it examines the complex interplay of factors that allowed a movie such as *Easy Rider* to achieve commercial and canonical success, while so many of its contemporaries and imitators failed to make an impact, either at the box office or within the annals of film history.

Taking the cultural and industrial impact of *Easy Rider* as its starting point, the thesis identifies a number of unifying characteristics shared by the youth-cult road movies spawned in the wake of Hopper’s film. While these films were unable to replicate *Easy Rider*’s commercial success, the thesis explores the partial reappraisal of this cycle, and its significance within the critically-constructed New Hollywood canon.

The contemporaneous violent cop cycle of urban thrillers elicited highly politicised responses from mainstream film critics in 1971. An examination of the differing stylistic practices, adherence to generic convention and modes of stardom in *Dirty Harry* and *The French Connection* reveals both these films to be hybrid works that do not comfortably fit the New Hollywood mould, in turn determining the legacies enjoyed by these films.

The limitations of the New Hollywood canon are similarly tested by *The Last Movie* and *The Hired Hand* (both 1971). As commercial and critical failures that

inspired no further production cycles, these films contrast markedly with 1971's more stylistically conservative commercial successes such as *The Last Picture Show*.

Belying the myth of auteurism that has become central to New Hollywood lore, it becomes clear that the Classical generic modes of Old Hollywood endured within the New Hollywood moment. By 1971, American film critics had already developed a set of aesthetic parameters that determined the conditions of entry to the rapidly-codifying New Hollywood pantheon.

The arguments in this thesis provide the basis for a broader and more contextualised reappraisal of the transition from Classical to contemporary modes of production.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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Introduction: The New Hollywood That Couldn't

Every age need not be a renaissance; it is only necessary for our own to be one.

To that end, critics and audiences create their own masterpieces and their own masters...

We are not, as yet, living in a renaissance.¹

-Stefan Kanfer, 1970

In recent years, the period of film history informally known as the New Hollywood has become an increasingly visible area of inquiry. Nick Heffernan neatly summarises the typical conception of the New Hollywood era, dubbing it a “brief flowering of politically and culturally radical film-making that blossomed with the decline of the traditional movie mass audience in the mid-1960s and withered with the arrival of the big-budget blockbuster in the mid-1970s”.² This now-familiar narrative, as typified by Peter Biskind’s 1998 *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, envisions a New Hollywood era spanning the decade from 1967-1977, prompted by heavy financial losses incurred through over-investment in historical epics and large-scale musicals throughout the mid-1960s, and the loss of the mass audience to television.³ In response, the major motion picture companies began investing in lower-budget, generically-unconventional films with untried directors granted new freedom with the collapse of the Motion Picture Code in the mid-1960s. Under this model, the New Hollywood begins with the films *Bonnie and Clyde* (dir. Arthur Penn, Warner Bros.-Seven Arts,

¹ Stefan Kanfer, “I: Pick of the Litter”, in Joseph Morgenstern and Stefan Kanfer (eds.), *Film 69/70* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 26.

² Nick Heffernan, “*The Last Movie* and the Critique of Imperialism”, *Film International*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (July 2006), p. 15.

³ Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex ‘n’ Drugs ‘n’ Rock ‘n’ Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999).

1967) and *The Graduate* (dir. Mike Nichols, Embassy Pictures, 1967), and is closed off with *Star Wars* (dir. George Lucas, Twentieth Century Fox, 1977) and the associated rise of the blockbuster.

While most critical considerations of this body of films offer either broad industrial histories, or auteurist writings focusing on the careers of individual directors, what is yet to emerge is an integrated formal/historical study of the films of the period that strives to identify the characteristics that distinguish New Hollywood films from the Classical Hollywood cinema that preceded it. There is also a dearth of analysis of the critical and discursive environment into which these movies were released, and the extent to which these commentaries may have influenced their reception and influence. To that end, my project seeks to undertake a formal analysis of these films themselves, linking aesthetic outcomes to industrial production practice. I aim to integrate formal analysis with a consideration of the films, and the secondary materials associated with their distribution and exhibition, as historically and industrially determined cultural artefacts.

A central aim of my thesis is to demonstrate the tightly bound links between industrial production practice and critical and audience reception. While box-office success is the dominant factor in determining the persistence of a film cycle, the potential for commercial impact is often determined, limited, foreclosed, or at least guided by critical reception. Furthermore, this initial period of critical reception plays a very important role in determining whether or not a film may achieve canonical enshrinement beyond its commercial theatrical release. This thesis will investigate the role that mainstream film critics played in the shaping of the film canon that would come to be known as the New Hollywood, and the way that this canon has continued to shift over the course of the ensuing decades. My intention is to clarify aspects of the constitution and historical origins of the New Hollywood, the question of what

might be considered a typical New Hollywood film, and the extent to which the parameters of such typicality are critically determined.

In order to investigate the formation of the New Hollywood canon as we now know it, I will explore a number of case studies that occupy various positions with respect to the conventional canon. The scope of this study permits the potential inclusion (or partial inclusion) of many movies that have not been considered in relation to New Hollywood in the past. The first of these case studies traces the lineage of films descended from a key film in any conception of the New Hollywood, *Easy Rider* (dir. Dennis Hopper, Columbia Pictures, 1969). Unprecedented in both its commercial success and the longevity of its cultural influence, *Easy Rider* transcended its exploitation origins, becoming what Richard Nowell dubs a “trailblazer hit,” spurring a cycle of commercially motivated imitators into production.⁴ Exploring some of the reasons for this, I undertake a close analysis of the formal and narrative workings of Hopper’s film in my first chapter. Amidst Hopper’s contradictory play with loaded cultural signs, and in the absence of a coherently articulated political stance, the film becomes a malleable text, open to differing interpretations. Despite its influence on the developing narrative and stylistic tropes of postclassical cinema, *Easy Rider* essentially adheres to the narrative conventions of Classical Hollywood cinema.⁵ Central to *Easy Rider*’s appeal is the use of self-contained motorcycle musical/montage sequences, which offer a break with narrative to revel in visual spectacle. In this sense, these sequences align with the stylistic mode described by Tom Gunning as the “cinema of attractions”.⁶ These musical/montage sequences, the commodification of its rock ‘n’ roll soundtrack, and

⁴ Richard Nowell, *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle* (New York; London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 46-47.

⁵ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

⁶ Tom Gunning, “Cinema of attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde”, *Wide Angle*, Vol. 8, Nos. 3 & 4 (Fall 1986), pp. 63-70.

its connection to exploitation cinema at the points of production and distribution are all factors that contributed towards *Easy Rider*'s commercial success.

Following Steve Neale's definition of a film cycle as a, "[group] of films made within a specific and limited time-span, and founded, for the most part, on the characteristics of individual commercial successes," I next look at a variety of films released in the wake of *Easy Rider*'s unprecedented box-office success, each of which arguably reworked the earlier film's elements in a different generic mould: *Five Easy Pieces* (dir. Bob Rafelson, Columbia Pictures, 1970) reimagines *Easy Rider* as an Ingmar Bergman-esque chamber drama, drawing on the traditions of European art cinema; *Vanishing Point* (Richard C. Sarafian, Twentieth Century Fox, 1971) recasts *Easy Rider* as chase/action movie; and *Two-Lane Blacktop* (dir. Monte Hellman, Universal Pictures, 1971) employs cinematic minimalism to obfuscate narrative motivation and cinematic style to the brink of abstraction, until the film itself is pulled apart.⁷ A consideration of the production contexts from which each film emerged will explore the extent to which *Easy Rider* influenced the inauguration of this cycle. Furthermore, by charting the critical reception that greeted each of these films upon their release, and the subsequent canonical reassessment of *Two-Lane Blacktop*, I begin to identify the characteristics shared by the films of the critically-constructed New Hollywood: contemporary resonance, genre frustration and revisionism, an emphasis on performance over stardom, downbeat, fatalistic endings, and a self-conscious foregrounding of cinematic style. An important question here is why some, but not all of, these films would later come to be categorised as part of the New Hollywood, rather than being relegated to the more specific and industrially accurate category of the "youth-cult cycle," such as that retrospectively identified by David A. Cook, and subsequently discussed by Derek Nystrom.⁸ In seeking to

⁷ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 9.

⁸ David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam 1970-*

explain why some movies found their way into the New Hollywood canon while others did not I consider the implications of stardom, and the persistent relevance of studio distribution power, with reference to two largely forgotten films of the post-*Easy Rider* cycle: *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* (dir. Sidney J. Furie, Paramount Pictures, 1970) and *Adam at 6 A.M.* (dir. Robert Scheerer, National General Pictures, 1970).

The second chapter looks at two studio films that straddle the boundary between New Hollywood and Old Hollywood, namely *The French Connection* (dir. William Friedkin, Twentieth Century Fox, 1971), and *Dirty Harry* (dir. Don Siegel, Warner Bros., 1971). The differing stylistic practices, adherence to generic conventions, and modes of stardom in each film guided the politicised responses that they encountered within mainstream film criticism at the time, which in turn has determined the way each film is remembered in the broader history of cinema. I refer particularly to the criticism of Pauline Kael and Roger Ebert, not only because of their exceptional prominence as high-profile mainstream critics and self-styled arbiters of popular taste (in contrast to the more introspective inclinations of, for example, Andrew Sarris), but also because the extensive anthologising and republication of both Kael and Ebert's criticism has elevated them to a particularly visible station as key historical markers of critical tastes of the period. On the basis of the continued availability of their criticism, be it in print (Kael) or online (Ebert), both critics remain prominent in the popular imagination. The generic and thematic material shared by *The French Connection* and *Dirty Harry*, and their temporal proximity, suggests a point of origin for another possible film cycle. The fact that this never cohered as rigidly as did the New Hollywood again indicates the importance played

1979 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000), pp. 162-172; Derek Nystrom, "Hard Hats and Movie Brats: Auteurism and the Class Politics of the New Hollywood", *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Spring 2004), p. 22; Derek Nystrom, *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class in 1970s American Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 5.

by critics in drawing these points of historical designation. Ultimately, the varying hybrid natures of each film would exclude both from being comfortably categorised as New Hollywood works, demonstrating the limitations of that classification. Like film noir, New Hollywood is an historically-specific industrial phenomenon transformed into an ahistorical critical category. By failing to fall entirely within the parameters of the New Hollywood categorisation, the influence of *Dirty Harry* and *The French Connection* were instead absorbed into the broader realm of genre.

My final chapter returns to *Easy Rider*, and considers the next two projects mounted by that film's key creative figures for Universal Pictures: *The Last Movie* (dir. Dennis Hopper, Universal Pictures, 1971) and *The Hired Hand* (dir. Peter Fonda, Universal Pictures, 1971). The manifest commercial failure of these two very different films, the critical vituperation that was reserved for Hopper's film and the general indifference that greeted Fonda's, represents a kind of end point for one potential New Hollywood. The profound ambition of Hopper's film, which drew influence from the French New Wave and the alienation techniques of playwright Bertolt Brecht, departed dramatically from traditional, industrially-enshrined aesthetic and narrative modes. On the other hand, Fonda's *Hired Hand* was a far more generically conventional entity, which did nothing more to prompt critical or commercial favour. Viewed in the context of 1971's commercial successes, such as *Fiddler on the Roof* (dir. Norman Jewison, United Artists, 1971), *Diamonds Are Forever* (dir. Guy Hamilton, United Artists, 1971) and *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (dir. Robert Stevenson, Walt Disney Productions/Buena Vista Distribution, 1971), I suggest that the classical, generic modes of Old Hollywood endured, and coexisted alongside the films of the New Hollywood and its more radical, shortlived offshoots, such as *The Last Movie*.⁹ Critical tastes effectively assassinated the aesthetic

⁹ *Fiddler on the Roof* would be the highest grossing film in the USA and Canada for 1971. *Diamonds are Forever* was the fifth highest grossing for the year, and *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* the tenth

ambitions of both Hopper and Fonda, so out of step were they with the popular critics' conception of what an American art film may be permitted to be. Far from the watershed success of *Easy Rider*, the critical and commercial failures of both *The Last Movie* and *The Hired Hand* point to the fact that the criteria for inclusion in the New Hollywood canon were already strictly delineated by the critical community of 1971.

The cycle of films I follow from *Easy Rider* to *The Last Movie* represents one kind of New Hollywood, which spanned the years 1969-1971. The inability of the conventional, retrospectively enshrined New Hollywood model (1967-1977) to simultaneously accommodate such diverse films as *The Last Movie*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *Dirty Harry* suggests that the state of Hollywood's industry in the early 1970s was significantly more complex than currently accepted, reductive models would indicate. As Steve Neale points out, the fact that writings on films of this period continually focus on a specific, canonically-enshrined body of films, at the expense of the wider field of films released by the major motion picture distributors in the same period, has a tendency to "produce a partial and misleading picture of the American film industry, its output and its audiences in the 1960s and early 1970s".¹⁰ In an attempt to avoid perpetuating the same kinds of privileged cinematic canons, I focus my analysis on two of the more readily-identifiable film cycles of the period, defined by clear iconography, coherent generic workings and similar production and distribution practices. In referring to the first of these films cycles, the post-*Easy Rider* road movie cycle, I borrow Cook and Nystrom's phrase "youth-cult" road movie cycle; for the second cycle, which encompasses *The French Connection* and *Dirty Harry*, I use the phrase "violent cop cycle". I recognise that in discussing such

highest grossing. Peter Kramer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), p. 108.

¹⁰ Steve Neale, "'The Last Good Time We Ever Had?': Revising the Hollywood Renaissance", in Linda Ruth Williams and Michael Hammond (eds.), *Contemporary American Cinema* (Maidenhead, England; New York: Open University Press, 2006), p. 91.

overly familiar films as *Easy Rider*, there may be a risk that I perpetuate the same kind of reductive retrospective selectivity that Neale has cautioned against. With this in mind, I attempt to avoid privileging discussion of canonically-enshrined entries over those contemporaneous films that have eluded canonical inclusion. Instead, I consider canonical films alongside some of their lesser-known contemporaries, combining close formal analysis with an appraisal of what Steve Neale, Gregory Lukow and Steven Ricci call the “inter-textual relay” that exists between films, the studios that produce them and the audiences that consume them.¹¹ Encompassing the publicity and marketing materials that accompany a film, along with critical and popular reception, this inter-textual relay places the films within the context of their cultural consumption, while also acknowledging the “central role [of] the critic in identifying genres and in constructing... corpuses of films”.¹²

Aims and Context: Which New Hollywood?

When coming to grips with the films of this era, a persistent dilemma facing film scholars is the lack of a universally-agreed upon definition of which years the New Hollywood period spans, which films it encompasses, or indeed, if a New Hollywood ever existed at all. A stable definition of what, precisely, the term New Hollywood refers to is far from fixed, and is further problematised by its occasional interchangeability with the terms “American Renaissance” or “Hollywood Renaissance”.

The conventional account of the New Hollywood, as laid out by such figures as Peter Biskind, David A. Cook, David Thomson and, more recently, Mark Harris, posits a continuous, decade-spanning New Hollywood period (1967-1977).¹³

¹¹ Gregory Lukow and Steven Ricci, “The ‘Audience’ Goes ‘Public’: Inter-Textuality, Genre and the Responsibilities of Film Literacy”, *On Film*, 12 (1984), pp. 29-36, cited in Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p. 2.

¹² Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p. 3.

¹³ Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*; Cook, *Lost Illusions*; Mark Harris, *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Films and the Birth of the New Hollywood* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

Confusingly, Peter Kramer indicates that many more critics, including Andrew Britton, James Monaco, Steve Neale, Thomas Schatz, David Thompson and Justin Wyatt, use the term “New Hollywood” to refer to the Blockbuster mode of production that emerged following the success of *Jaws* (dir. Steven Spielberg, Universal Pictures, 1975) and *Star Wars*, and use the term to refer to the dominant mode of production from the late 1970s onwards to the present day.¹⁴ Under this model, everyone from Tony Scott to Michael Bay would be viewed as New Hollywood directors, despite the fact that even the most adventurous of critics would be hard-pressed to locate any similarities (stylistically, generically, industrially) shared between the works of those filmmakers, and the films commonly situated under Biskind’s 1967-1977 New Hollywood umbrella. For the sake of this thesis, my use of the term New Hollywood aligns with the former set of writers, but with an acknowledgement of the tenuousness of its history of usage.

One commonality shared by both sets of practitioners of the “New Hollywood” mantle is that relatively few critics seem willing to combine both industrial/historical and formal analysis (what David Bordwell and Noël Carroll term “middle-level research”) in order to begin grouping the films of the period into a more meaningful, concrete historical model that moves beyond such arbitrary and vague categorisations as New Hollywood or American Renaissance.¹⁵ One view is that the New Hollywood represents a termination point for the Classical Hollywood cinema.¹⁶ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson identify the central characteristics of Classical Hollywood cinema as clarity of storytelling, mutability of

¹⁴ Peter Kramer, “Post-Classical Hollywood”, in John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (eds.), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 289-309.

¹⁵ David Bordwell, “Film Studies and Grand Theory”, in David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (eds.), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp. 26-30.

¹⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, “The Pathos of Failure: Notes on the Unmotivated Hero”, *Monogram* 6 (1975), pp. 13-19, reprinted as “The Pathos of Failure: American Films in the 1970s: Notes on the Unmotivated Hero”, in Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King (eds.), *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), pp. 279-292.

meaning, and the presence of goal-based protagonists/narratives and continuity editing.¹⁷ The stylistic mode of Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's Classical Hollywood might be apprehended as one of invisibility, in which spatially-coherent continuity editing imparts narrative information as clearly as possible, without drawing attention to its own formal workings. In opposition to this, Robert Phillip Kolker proposes that the New Hollywood film,

Refus[es] the classical American approach to film, which is to make the formal structure of a work erase itself as it creates its content... [New Hollywood] directors delight in making us aware of the fact that it is film we are watching, an artifice, something made in special ways, to be perceived in special ways.¹⁸

The role that critics have played in constructing the concept of the New Hollywood as we now know it, regardless of the industrial reality, should not be underestimated.

Investigating the origins of this concept necessitates navigating a number of distinct theoretical bodies and historical timelines. In a chronological sense, writings on the New Hollywood can generally be divided into one of three categories: namely, first-generation criticism, typified by the writings of Pauline Kael, Roger Ebert, and Manny Farber in the 1960s and 70s; historical, industry-spanning accounts, the most detailed and wide-ranging of which is David A. Cook's 2000 *Lost Illusions:*

American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam; and auterist/aesthetic histories which tend to focus on the careers of individual directors. Joseph Gelmis' 1971 *The Film Director as Superstar*, and Michael Pye and Lynda Myles' 1979 *The*

¹⁷ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

¹⁸ Robert Phillip Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman*. Second Edition (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 9, cited in Kramer, "Post-Classical Hollywood", p. 304.

Movie Brats: How the Film Generation Took Over Hollywood are two early examples of this final category.¹⁹

Looking at the first generation criticism, it is interesting to trace where the concept of a New Hollywood first emerged. Pauline Kael, reviewing *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (dir. George Roy Hill, Twentieth Century Fox, 1969), perceived that a major shift was underway, writing that, “movies and, even more, movie audiences have been changing. The art houses are now (for the first time) dominated by American movies, and the young audiences waiting outside, sitting on the sidewalk or standing in line, are no longer waiting just for entertainment”.²⁰ However, in the same review, Kael expressed cynicism about the motivations underlying this new cinema, and also lamented its belatedness, stating, “we all know how the industry men think: they’re going to try to make ‘now’ movies when now is already then”.²¹

A mainstream critic, Kael was alert to a shift in audience tastes that permitted the establishment of a new American art cinema. This contrasts starkly with what was occurring at the higher levels of US film publication in the same period, as academic cinema journals paid remarkably little attention to the nascent new wave playing out in the commercial cinemas of their nation. Throughout the early 1970s, *Film Comment*, for example, focused predominantly on contemporary foreign cinema, historical appraisals of directors from Hollywood’s Golden Era and a general elevation of “canonical” figures at the expense of any lengthy consideration of contemporary American figures.²² 1971 saw extensive articles on Bernardo

¹⁹ Cook, *Lost Illusions*; Joseph Gelmis, *The Film Director as Superstar* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1971); and Michael Pye and Lynda Myles, *The Movie Brats: How the Film Generation Took Over Hollywood* (London: Faber, 1979).

²⁰ Pauline Kael, “The Bottom of the Pit”, *The New Yorker* (27 September 1969), reprinted in Pauline Kael, *Deeper Into Movies* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 3.

²¹ Kael, “The Bottom of the Pit”, *Deeper Into Movies*, p. 6.

²² Of course, the concept of canon formation was the always the central concern of auteurism, as the earliest auteurist writers in both France (*Cahiers du cinéma*) and the United States (Andrew Sarris) set out to reappraise the critical standings of commercial filmmakers such as John Ford, Howard Hawks,

Bertolucci, Yasujiro Ozu, Francois Truffaut, F.W. Murnau, Orson Welles, Max Ophuls and John Ford, and the following year, Paul Schrader penned a piece on what was, by 1972, already one of the most discussed film genres, with “Notes on Film Noir,” in an issue that also included articles on George Cukor, Dziga Vertov, and, in a notable exception to the dominant tendency, *Klute* (dir. Alan J. Pakula, Warner Bros., 1971).²³ By mid-decade, things were beginning to shift. March 1976 found Schrader himself occupying the magazine’s cover for *Taxi Driver* (dir. Martin Scorsese, Columbia Pictures, 1976), and in September 1978, the troublesome classification itself reared its head, as *Film Comment* introduced its cover story, which offered, “studies of three major directors in the *New Hollywood*”.²⁴ The three directors in question were Robert Altman, Larry Cohen and Terrence Malick. The fact that the films of Larry Cohen have been subsequently revised out of all but the most obscurantist recollections of the New Hollywood demonstrates the inherent instability and volatility of any kind of cinematic canon. Robert Altman, one of the most stylistically atypical directors of the period, had not had enjoyed commercial and critical success since *Nashville* (Paramount Pictures, 1975), and even in his period of critical vogue, the commercially-successful *M*A*S*H* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1970) was followed with *Brewster McCloud* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1970), which nonplussed critics and audiences alike. By 1978 Altman was falling out of favour with studios, critics and the box-office in equal measure. He would spend the 1980s working in television before reversing his fortunes with *The Player* (Fine Line Features, 1992). Similarly, Malick would disappear from view wholesale for 20 years after the release of *Days of Heaven* (Paramount Pictures, 1978).

and Alfred Hitchcock. If a consistent trend can be identified in both first-wave auteurism and the New Hollywood project, it is that it can often take critics some time to consolidate the canon.

²³ Paul Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir”, *Film Comment*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 1972), pp. 8-13.

²⁴ Anon, “In This Issue”, *Film Comment*, Vol. 14, No. 5 (September/October 1978), p. 1. My emphasis.

More broadly speaking, given that retrospective conventional wisdom has gone on to dictate that by 1978 the “New Hollywood” moment had passed, *Film Comment*’s showcase seems oddly mistimed, suggesting that the for the custodians of high-brow cinephilia at *Film Comment*, the historical moment could only begin to be observed from the point of its decline.²⁵ In the Biskind-approved chronology of the period, 1978 marked the end-point of the creative freedoms that enabled the defining films of the period, given the production and budgetary excesses of such large-scale auteurist projects as *New York, New York* (dir. Martin Scorsese, United Artists, 1977), *Apocalypse Now* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, United Artists, 1979) and *Heaven’s Gate* (dir. Michael Cimino, United Artists, 1980).

Film Comment’s earlier affiliation with Schrader indicates a more interesting schism within the group of filmmakers generally considered to fall under the New Hollywood umbrella. Unlike directors who came to prominence during the first five years of the canonically-enshrined New Hollywood period (for instance, Arthur Penn, born 1922, Sidney Lumet, born 1924, Sam Peckinpah, born 1925, Norman Jewison, born 1926, Mike Nichols, born 1931, and John Boorman, born 1933), Schrader (born 1946) was one of a second group of filmmakers who were between ten and twenty years younger. This second group emerged professionally in the early 1970s, the beneficiaries of burgeoning university film studies courses, and television companies’ acquisition of vast studio back-catalogues, resulting in a newfound accessibility of a rich cinematic archive. The postgraduate research qualifications of figures such as Martin Scorsese (born 1942, completed an MA from NYU) and Paul Schrader (MA UCLA) indicated to the critical community that these were serious individuals with a deep engagement with cinema history and theory. Thus the arrival, with *Taxi Driver* in 1976, of Martin Scorsese and Paul Schrader on the cover of *Film Comment*.

²⁵ *Movie and Screen echo Film Comment*, taking until 1975 and 1976 respectively to acknowledge developments in contemporary Hollywood. See Kramer, “Post-Classical Hollywood”, p. 300.

If there is a disjuncture between these two groups of filmmakers, then 1971, squarely at the mid-point of the New Hollywood decade, represents a crucial turning point for Hollywood production trends, thematic and stylistic preoccupations at the point of production, and critical tastes at the point of reception.²⁶ A brief consideration of some major films from 1971 can demonstrate these shifts in sensibility, and simultaneously attest to the porousness of retrospective historical categories, and the ease with which film may be selectively shuffled between retrospectively-enshrined canonical categories. I have already identified two different bodies of filmmakers at work within the decade-spanning New Hollywood period, joined in the year 1971. For the sake of clarity, I will borrow the term American Renaissance to refer to the first set (encompassing Penn, Peckinpah et al., and spanning the years 1969-1971). For the second group, I borrow Pye and Myles' book title to identify the Movie Brat period (comprised of Lucas, Spielberg etc., and spanning the years 1971-1977).

The American Renaissance pictures consistently work with generic revision and subversion (including downbeat endings), self-consciously invoke contemporary resonance, and frequently display a newfound freedom to represent adult concepts inspired by European art cinemas. Indeed, the collapse of the Motion Picture Production Code in the late-1960s permitted the depiction of graphic violence, and a newfound candour in the presentation of sexuality and drug use. The Movie Brat films synthesise these consistent aspects of the first American Renaissance, and reinterpret them in a more overtly autobiographical, nostalgic mode. Aside from the autobiographical/nostalgic thematic content found in the earliest films of such Movie Brat directors as Martin Scorsese, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, there is also an observable engagement with cinematic history visible in a widespread return to the

²⁶ Indeed, Richard Maltby and Ian Craven situate the beginning of the "Hollywood Renaissance" in 1971. See Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema* (Oxford; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), p. 478.

structures of generic convention, along with more overt incorporations of cinematic allusion/homage than are typically observable in the films of the American Renaissance.

Two transitional figures whose films straddle the timeline and blur the distinction between the American Renaissance and Movie Brat periods are Francis Ford Coppola and Peter Bogdanovich. Coppola's *The Rain People* (Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, 1969) has much in common with *Easy Rider*. In a case of zeitgeist-channelling parallel development, *The Rain People* was released a month before the first screenings of Hopper's film, with which it shares many of the characteristics that would soon become staples for *Easy Rider*'s imitators: an alienated youthful protagonist taking to the road with the vague intention of reclaiming a lost sense of personal/national identity, against a backdrop of countercultural accoutrements, shot on location. These real-world locations become discrete and lyrical sources of spectacular pleasure, shot through with a general streak of aimlessness manifested in the removal of goal-based narrative markers, culminating in an inevitable moment of defeat. Taking as its subject a female protagonist (Shirley Knight plays Natalie Ravenna), it follows an alienated housewife who, upon discovering that she is pregnant, walks out on her husband and her unhappy domestic life, in order to aimlessly traverse America's highway system in the family station wagon. Coppola casts the youth-cult road movie narrative in what could be perceived as a distinctly feminist mould, proving that the brand of existential angst that would become a staple of the post-*Easy Rider* cycle need not be an exclusively masculine one (although in execution, it almost always would be – Scorsese's *Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More* [Warner Bros., 1974] is another exception, and remains similarly non-canonical, unlike his more distinctly masculinist works). *The Rain People* was a deeply personal project for Coppola. He wrote the film as well as directing it. Before its release, the

director, somewhat uncertain as to how the film would be received, told Joseph Gelmis that, “good or bad, it’s me, it’s my own. If I’ve got to take raps, I’d rather take raps for my own tastes. That film was a labor of love”.²⁷ Yet despite representing Coppola’s realisation of a small-scale, personal vision, *The Rain People* is not remembered as a watershed entry in the auteurist pantheon of the New Hollywood. It remains one of Coppola’s most obscure directorial efforts from the period, despite its evident closeness to his heart, indicating that the primacy of the auteur’s personal expression alone is not sufficient to permit entry into the New Hollywood canon.

Far from the autobiographical tendencies that are considered a crucial hallmark of the New Hollywood auteur’s work, Coppola’s subsequent directorial effort, the film with which he would become synonymous, was adapted from pulp author Mario Puzo’s 1969 bestseller: *The Godfather*. Coppola reputedly accepted the assignment for purely mercenary reasons, earlier telling Joseph Gelmis, “I’ll probably do another big picture now. I really need the money”.²⁸ Nevertheless, *The Godfather* (Paramount Pictures, 1972) represents a stylistic and thematic shift from the American Renaissance to Movie Brat cycle, with its expansive narrative grandeur, return to causally-motivated narrative and adherence to generic convention, invocation of cinematic allusions to Hollywood’s golden era, and nostalgic setting. *The Godfather* manages to meld moments of quotidian realism with a sweeping cinematic sense of nostalgia in its presentation of period settings.

Peter Bogdanovich’s *The Last Picture Show* (Columbia Pictures, 1971), for all its timely sexual candour, derives its sense of cinematic style from an earlier era, exemplified by its period setting, black and white photography and narrative concern with the closure of the local cinema literalising the collapse of the community and the loss of an intrinsically American way of life. Bogdanovich began his career not as a

²⁷ Gelmis, p. 187.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 190.

filmmaker but as a cinephile, programming film screenings at New York's Museum of Modern Art and writing film criticism for *Esquire*, before moving to Los Angeles and being taken under Roger Corman's wing. Having spent the entirety of his youth in New York, Bogdanovich adapted his mournful evocation of small-town Texan life from Larry McMurtry's semi-autobiographical 1966 novel, belying, as with *The Godfather*, the commonly-perceived centrality of the auteur's personal autobiography as a cornerstone of the New Hollywood film. With *The Last Picture Show*, Bogdanovich's cinematic style owes more to such figures of Classical Hollywood as Howard Hawks, Joseph Mankiewicz, George Stevens, John Ford and Henry Hathaway than it does to the more antagonistic and revisionist tendencies of the iconoclastic American Renaissance directors. Bogdanovich evokes the wistful, nostalgic tone that would become a hallmark of many subsequent movie brat films.

The examples of Schrader, Bogdanovich and Coppola point to the uncertain lines of delineation between the Hollywood Renaissance and Movie Brat cycles within the broader New Hollywood moment, the boundaries of which have not yet been clearly defined in writings on the period. One of the most detailed and productive analyses of the period appeared while it was arguably still in train, in the form of Thomas Elsaesser's "The Pathos of Failure: Notes on the Unmotivated Hero," published in *Monogram* in 1975. Charting narrative conventions and recurring settings across the films of the period, Elsaesser views the road movies of the early 1970s as symptomatic of a broader crisis, as their alienated, aimless protagonists are ostentatiously unable to motivate narrative action. Importantly, while Elsaesser acknowledges the influence of European art cinema on this developing narrative trend, he does not posit a wholesale break with Classical Hollywood, as the films of the New Hollywood are concerned with "shifting and modifying traditional genres and themes, while never quite shedding their support," remaining, essentially, and

unlike the European art film, “an audience-oriented cinema that permits no explicitly intellectual or meta-narrative construction”.²⁹ Elsaesser categorises the films of the post-*Easy Rider* road movie cycle as inherently liberal, and the “cop thriller or vigilante film,” which includes both *The French Connection* and *Dirty Harry*, as “conservative or Republican” in outlook.³⁰ In contrast, I will argue that political meaning is far from fixed in any of those films, all three works being, at best, ambivalent texts, more closely aligned with Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson’s view of the Classical Hollywood text as one open to a variety of readings, than with Elsaesser’s conception of the Post-Classical New Hollywood film as one of closed, fixed political meanings. Indeed, the political ambiguity of each of these films is likely a deliberate commercial strategy to appeal to the widest possible audience, a proposition supported by the fact that all three films were box-office successes. My position is broadly consistent with Richard Maltby’s claim that a belief in “an auteurist American cinema [that] might provide social and political comment through mainstream movies” is nothing more than an “illusion”.³¹

Christian Keathley has expanded upon Elsaesser’s article, viewing the figure of the “unmotivated hero” through the lens of Gilles Deleuze’s writings on the “crisis of the action image”. Keathley sees in Deleuze’s writings on the cultural conditions surrounding post-World War II European art cinema a prophecy of the way that the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal would permeate the films of the New Hollywood, which became something of a “post-traumatic cycle” for the US national psyche.³² Robin Wood takes a similarly psychoanalytical view of the films of the

²⁹ Elsaesser, “The Pathos of Failure”, *The Last Great American Picture Show*, p. 287.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 282-83.

³¹ Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*. Second Edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 176.

³² See Gilles Deleuze (trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta), *Cinema 2. The Time Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989); and Christian Keathley, “Trapped in the Affection Image: Hollywood’s Post-traumatic Cycle”, in Elsaesser, Horwath and King (eds.), *The Last Great American Picture Show*, pp. 293-308.

period in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986).³³ For Wood, the increasing savagery of the American horror film from the mid-1970s onwards represents an attempt to cathartically work through the darkness at the heart of the shared public unconscious during troubling times.

Elsaesser, Keathly and Wood all situate the 1970s Hollywood film within a Post-Classical framework. On the other hand, Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson take issue with the very categorisation of a Post-Classical Hollywood, believing that their parameters of Classical Hollywood are sufficiently elastic to contain the aberrations of the New Hollywood period, claiming that none of the New Hollywood directors “significantly changed the mode of film production ... the classical style remains the dominant model for feature filmmaking”.³⁴

Given the uncertainty as to whether or not the New Hollywood should be viewed as a Post-Classical cinema, it is unsurprising that after summarising the many positions that have been taken by different critics in the course of this debate, Peter Kramer concludes his chapter on “Post-Classical Hollywood” by stating that instead of “conceptual debate about Old Hollywood and New Hollywood... careful, systematic, and complex stylistic analysis,” is needed before a firm position can be arrived at.³⁵ That kind of analysis is one ambition of this research project. Despite repeated generalist claims from Biskind et al. that the New Hollywood represents a significant point of departure from Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson’s Classical Hollywood mould, no work has yet emerged to definitively catalogue why, or indeed if, the films of the New Hollywood period refuse to assimilate easily with typical Hollywood fare made either side of the years 1967-77.

³³ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

³⁴ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, pp. 370-72.

³⁵ Kramer, “Post-Classical Hollywood”, p. 307.

Three recent book-length studies have taken significant steps in this direction. The first of these, Derek Nystrom's *Hard Hats, Rednecks and Macho Men* (2009), studies three distinct 1970s Hollywood film cycles identified by Nystrom: the youth-cult cycle, the Southern, and the nightlife film.³⁶ Nystrom undertakes textual/formal analysis of individual films, and examines marketing materials and contemporary reception in order to explore the representation of class, masculinity and race within these films. Nystrom's extratextual melding of formal, historical and industrial analysis in situating these films within the shifting context of social history serves as something of a model for the methodology of my own research project. More recently, Jonathan Kirshner's *Hollywood's Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in America* (2012) explicitly places the films of the period alongside an historical overview of the major political and social upheavals of the time, exploring the ways in which the films not only reflect their cultural moment, but also inform it.³⁷ Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema* (2010) similarly brings a blend of formal and historical analysis to bear on a variety of major Hollywood films of the 1970s in order to explore Berliner's theory that incoherence became a fundamental narrative trait during that period, typified by "a nagging refusal to fulfill expectations".³⁸ While the identification of incoherence as a central component of the films of the New Hollywood is not a new position (both Richard Maltby and Robin Wood have made similar observations of the films of the period), Berliner integrates a new degree of rigorous formal and narrative analysis in

³⁶ Nystrom, *Hard Hats*.

³⁷ Jonathan Kirshner, *Hollywood's Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film In America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012).

³⁸ Todd Berliner, *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), p. 89.

support of his argument, setting a standard of inquiry that I have hoped to emulate with my own research project.³⁹

Whilst the entire notion of the New Hollywood is predicated upon the assumption that things were beginning to happen differently in Hollywood between the years 1967-77, those differences were primarily discerned, defined and enshrined in print retrospectively by critics (both mainstream and academic). To date, most studies of the films of this period have overlooked the cycle of influence that occurs between production and reception. By returning to key film cycles of the period, the circumstances of their production, and the initial responses these films garnered from contemporary critics, I hope to interrogate where this critically-constructed concept of the New Hollywood originated, where it shifted, and how it continues to shift over time. From the time I began this project, in early 2010, to the final stages of its completion in 2014, many of the principal subjects of my research, including Dennis Hopper, Bert Schneider, Richard C. Sarafian, Alan Sharp, Arthur Penn, Richard Zanuck, L.M. Kit Carson and Mike Nichols passed away. As the period itself becomes increasingly distant from us, and the principal participants continue to age, what is left is the films themselves, and the writings on them; now, more than ever, an historical approach to the New Hollywood is essential.

³⁹ Whereas Wood sees the essential inarticulacy of these films as the expression of cultural anxieties within the United States, Maltby points to more fundamental failures within the fabric of film itself, leaving directors little choice but to revel in wilfully ambiguous works (Altman, Coppola, Scorsese), or directly attack the sensibilities of the audience with what he terms “a cinema of dissent” (Aldrich, Peckinpah). See Richard Maltby, *Harmless Entertainment: Hollywood and the Ideology of Consensus* (Metuchen, NJ; London: The Scarecrow Press, 1983) and Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*.

CHAPTER ONE: *EASY RIDER*

Easy Rider is a key film in any conceptualisation of the New Hollywood. Like *The Graduate* before it, *Easy Rider* was an unexpected financial success, galvanising a mass youth audience at a time when cinema admissions in the United States were in decline. As with *The Graduate*, *Easy Rider* attracted young cinema-goers through its packaging of sensational narrative elements and a savvily commodified soundtrack. Roger Ebert was one of many writers to view *Easy Rider* as a decisive moment in which Hollywood's old guard yielded to the new, as encapsulated in the two generations of Fonda. In his review of the film in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Roger Ebert contrasted *Easy Rider* star Peter Fonda with his father, paragon of the Old Hollywood Henry, who was, "said to have come out of *Easy Rider* a confused and puzzled man. He had worked in movies for 35 years and made some great ones, and now his son Peter was going to be a millionaire because of a movie Henry couldn't even understand".¹ The following year, *Time* echoed the same sentiment, stating that Peter would, "doubtless be a millionaire before the age of 30 for producing and starring in *Easy Rider*, the little movie that killed the big picture".² Not all film publications attributed such significance to Dennis Hopper's directorial debut. As mainstream magazines and newspapers rushed out articles on the cultural impact of *Easy Rider*, the film was a notable absence from the pages of more academically-inclined film publications such as *Screen* and *Film Quarterly*. *Easy Rider* would thus uneasily take its place in the critical landscape: seemingly omnipresent within the mainstream media, yet more famed for its cultural than its cinematic significance, and otherwise wholly overlooked by upper echelons of the film intelligentsia. Nevertheless, *Easy Rider* would point to new modes of production and distribution

¹ Roger Ebert, "Easy Rider", *Chicago Sun-Times* (28 September 1969).
<<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19690928/REVIEWS/909280301/1023>>. (Accessed 16 October 2013).

² Anon, "The Flying Fondas and How They Grew", *Time* (16 February 1970), p. 58.

that would become hallmarks of the auteurist New Hollywood over subsequent years, even as its box-office dominance was rendered all the more ostentatious in the wake of the consistent failure of its imitators, which adopted, in various configurations, its means of production, its stylistic conceits and generic motifs, and its countercultural accoutrements.

Setting aside its legacy for the time being, it is worth pondering exactly how this supposedly liberal-propagandist, genre-splicing *Easy Rider*, which goes for long periods without dialogue, makes no real attempt to establish its narrative back story or character psychology, and suddenly kills off its protagonists after a protracted, non-narrative drug-trip sequence, could curry such massive mainstream favour.³ On paper, its plot seems slight indeed. Billy (Dennis Hopper) and Wyatt (Peter Fonda), flush from running a shipment of drugs from Mexico to Los Angeles, set off cross-country on motorcycles, en route to retirement in Florida, with a planned stopover for Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Along the way, they pick up a hitchhiker, visit a hippie commune, and befriend civil rights lawyer George Hanson (Jack Nicholson), who is thereafter beaten to death by hostile Southerners. After making regular stops to smoke marijuana, Billy and Wyatt make it to Mardi Gras, and ingest LSD with two prostitutes in a New Orleans cemetery. The next day, they are shot by two duck hunters while in transit to Florida.

As a project, *Easy Rider* would represent the culmination of the years spent by Hopper and Fonda working in exploitation cinema in Roger Corman's American International Pictures (AIP) stable. Peter Fonda had starred in Corman's earlier biker film *The Wild Angels* (dir. Roger Corman, American International Pictures, 1966), and a year later, Hopper starred in the similarly themed *The Glory Stompers* (dir. Anthony M. Lanza, American International Pictures, 1967). *Easy Rider* co-star Jack

³ James Monaco, *American Film Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 56.

Nicholson appeared in another biker film *Hells Angels on Wheels* (dir. Richard Rush, U.S. Films, 1967), and wrote for Corman the psychedelic lysergic exploitation picture, *The Trip* (dir. Roger Corman, American International Pictures, 1967), in which Fonda and Hopper both starred. The following year, Nicholson would appear onscreen with Hopper as members of a film crew, alongside director Bob Rafelson, in one of the many instances of fourth-wall breakage in *Head* (dir. Bob Rafelson, Columbia Pictures, 1968). Nicholson co-wrote the screenplay for *Head* with Rafelson, and the two produced the film along with Bert Schneider under the auspices of their Raybert production company, which they had earlier formed to make *The Monkees* television sitcom (NBC, 1966-68). The success of the television show enabled a production deal to be forged with Columbia Pictures, with *Head* to be their first studio motion picture.

This criss-crossing web of connections demonstrates that *Easy Rider* did not emerge from a vacuum. Hopper, Fonda and Nicholson had spent the better-part of the five years preceding *Easy Rider* exploring the links between exploitation films, motorcycles, psychedelic drug use, sex and violence and rock and roll soundtracks. Hopper and Fonda had already collaborated on an unproduced screenplay with comedian Don Sherman, entitled *The Yin and The Yang*.⁴ *Easy Rider* was conceived by Fonda while he was in Toronto promoting *The Trip*; his central concept was to meld the conventions of the biker exploitation film and the western.⁵ Hopper immediately agreed to direct the project, in which they would both star, with Fonda producing. AIP studio head Sam Arkoff turned the project down when Hopper refused a contract that would enable him to be replaced as director if the project went

⁴ Alex Simon, "Dennis Hopper Is Riding Easy", *Venice Magazine* (Spring 2009), reprinted in Nick Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 204.

⁵ Peter Fonda, *Don't Tell Dad: A Memoir* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1998), p. 241.

over budget.⁶ Thinking the project had ended with AIP's refusal, Hopper and Fonda shopped a cross-dressing presidential screwball comedy project entitled *The Queen* to Schneider; Schneider was uninterested, but offered them a \$40 000 advance towards a \$360 000 budget for the shelved project that would become *Easy Rider*.⁷

Fonda and Hopper hired counterculture novelist Terry Southern to write the screenplay with them; Southern had earlier co-written *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, Columbia Pictures, 1964). The first material to be shot was the Mardi Gras sequence, which was filmed on location on 16mm by Hopper and an amateur crew. Hopper later claimed as much material was shot for the Mardi Gras sequence as was shot for the rest of the film, which led to disagreements with Columbia, and necessitated additional re-writing with Southern.⁸ The film was shot in seven weeks, including the week spent at Mardi Gras for the 16mm shoot, and four weeks on location shooting the cross-country road trip.⁹ For the location shoots, a small (by Hollywood standards), 12 person crew was used.¹⁰ The process of location shooting kept prying studio eyes away from Hopper's dailies until it was too late, enabling him to develop his loose, improvisatory directorial style, which he characterised as "keep[ing oneself] free for things to happen, for the accident - and then learn[ing] how to use the accident".¹¹ In fact, this approach created enormous problems when the time came to edit the film, with Hopper preparing a 220 minute cut of the film which was deemed commercially unreleasable. Of this version, Hopper said,

⁶ J. Hoberman, *The Dream Life: Movies, Media and the Mythology of the Sixties* (New York: The New York Press, 2003), p. 192.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 192-93.

⁸ L.M. Kit Carson, "Easy Rider: A Very American Thing", *Evergreen* (November 1969), reprinted in Nick Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 2.

⁹ Carson, in Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁰ Michael Goodwin, "Camera: László Kovács", *Take One*, Vol. 2, No. 12 (July-August 1970, pub. 4 October 1971), p. 15.

¹¹ Carson, in Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews*, p. 13, emphasis in original.

I loved the 220-minute version because you got the real feeling for the Ride - very hypnotic, very beautiful, like in *2001* [*A Space Odyssey*, dir. Stanley Kubrick, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968]. One of the things I liked in *2001* was the hypnotic feeling of movement. We had that at one time with the bikes. You really felt like you crossed country, the same way Antonioni makes you feel you're walking around with a character in his movies - suddenly he creates in you the same boring, edgy sense of time that his character is suffering from. But how many people were going to sit for three hours and forty minutes of bike-riding and dig it?¹²

While Hopper's invocation of Michaelangelo Antonioni reflects his desire to synthesise the influence of European art cinema with his distinctly American vision, his final sentence reveals his ultimately pragmatic recognition of the commercial imperatives of the film. As it was, Hopper had his bags packed for him by Schneider, and was sent on a holiday, from which he returned to a 94-minute cut that was completed by editor Donn Cambern in his absence.¹³

At the 1969 Cannes Film Festival, *Easy Rider* won Hopper the "Prix de la première œuvre" (best first work prize), a month before its general theatrical release in the United States. Over the following six months, *Easy Rider* would win awards at the Edinburgh Film Festival and the New York Critics Circle, garner two Academy Award nominations (Jack Nicholson for Best Actor, and Fonda, Hopper and Southern for Best Original Screenplay), and be named in *Time Magazine's* "Top of the Decade" cinema column, despite never galvanising a positive critical consensus.¹⁴ It would also be the fourth highest grossing film at the domestic US box office, taking \$19 million in rentals, bettered only by *Butch Cassidy* (\$46 million), *The Love Bug*

¹² Carson, in Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews*, pp. 19-20.

¹³ Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, p. 71.

¹⁴ Anon, "Cinema: Top of the Decade", *Time* (26 December 1969), p. 52.

(dir. Robert Stevenson, Buena Vista Distribution, 1968; \$23 million) and *Midnight Cowboy* (dir. John Schlesinger, United Artists, 1969, \$44 million).¹⁵

The intervening decades have done nothing to diminish *Easy Rider*'s impact, as it has well and truly entered the pop culture lexicon of both the mainstream (its iconography overtly recycled in *The Simpsons* [Twentieth Century Fox Television, 1989-present], *Beavis and Butthead Do America* [dir. Mike Judge, Paramount Pictures, 1996] and the *Grand Theft Auto* series of computer games (Rockstar Games, 1997-present). The avant-garde American experimental filmmaker James Benning remade *Easy Rider* in 2012, shooting static shots of the original film's locations as they presently stand, and laying them over the soundtrack of Hopper's film.

How, then, to explain the enduring appeal of this film that seems so obviously rooted in the fashions, moods and attitudes of the popular culture from which it emerged? It is not as if *Easy Rider* has enjoyed a moment of widespread contemporary resurgence in popularity. Rather, it has always lurked on the fringes of the collective cinematic memory, waiting to be rediscovered by each consecutive generation. This is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, given the film's inclusion in the United States National Film Registry, and on the American Film Institute's "100 Years, 100 Movies" list. Away from the now clichéd images of men riding motorbikes to the sound of Steppenwolf's "Born to Be Wild," *Easy Rider* represents a far more complex (and problematic) entity than the antiestablishment celebration of the open road of popular memory. As Dean Brandum details in his 2010 essay "A Legacy Went Searching for a Film... Dennis Hopper and *Easy Rider*," perfect conditions existed when *Easy Rider* was released for the film to begin its process of self-mythologising, generating an eminent stature that its creators have

¹⁵ Kramer, *The New Hollywood*, p. 107.

done nothing to dispel over the years.¹⁶ It is necessary now to separate the film from its towering legacy in order to free up space for consideration of the many narratives at work within Hopper's film, all of which are at risk of being blotted out by hazy recollections of *Easy Rider* as charmingly dated hippy relic. A close analysis of *Easy Rider* prompts contradictory impulses to read the film as conservative artefact, as article of conflicted patriotism, as travelogue of the American picturesque, and as prototype for the following 10 years of Hollywood film production.

Just as any attempt to affix a singular reading to *Easy Rider* proves to be a slippery endeavour, its director, too, underwent several chameleonic shifts throughout his career, with extended periods away from mainstream visibility amidst volatile hearsay as to his tumultuous private life. Hopper became a keen student of James Dean's acting method when they appeared together in *Rebel Without a Cause* (dir. Nicholas Ray, Warner Bros., 1955). This approach would inform Hopper's twitchy appearances throughout the 1960s, *Easy Rider* heralded the arrival of Hopper as *enfant terrible* auteur, a persona that would expand to career-killing proportions with *The Last Movie*. Later incarnations would include countercultural dropout (*Kid Blue* [dir. James Frawley, Twentieth Century Fox, 1973] through to *Flashback* [dir. Franco Amurri, Paramount Pictures, 1990]), psychologically-damaged war veteran (*Tracks* [dir. Henry Jaglom, Trio, 1977], *O.C. and Stiggs* [dir. Robert Altman, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1987]), fried drug casualty (*Apocalypse Now*), psychopath (*Blue Velvet* [dir. David Lynch, De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986], *Speed* [dir. Jan de Bont, Twentieth Century Fox, 1994]), lonely sociopath (*Der amerikanische Freund/The American Friend* [dir. Wim Wenders, New Yorker Films, 1977]), troubled father figure with a heart of gold (*Hoosiers* [dir. David Anspaugh, Orion Pictures, 1986]), patron saint of the Miramax generation (*Red Rock West* [dir. John

¹⁶ Dean Brandum, "A Legacy Went Searching for a Film... Dennis Hopper and *Easy Rider*", *Senses of Cinema* (April 2010). <<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2010/feature-articles/a-legacy-went-searching-for-a-film%E2%80%A6-dennis-hopper-and-easy-rider/>>. (Accessed 18 August 2010).

Dahl, Roxie Releasing, 1993] and *True Romance* [dir. Tony Scott, Warner Bros., 1993]), improbably slick corporate type (*Land of the Dead* [dir. George A. Romero, Universal Pictures, 2005], *Crash* [Starz, 2008-09]), and finally as the genial senior collecting his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in the final months of his life, his body wracked with terminal cancer.¹⁷

Following his death in May 2010, as television obituaries began recycling footage of his well-groomed early turn in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and astride a motorcycle clad in buckskins in 1969, other journalists struggled with how, exactly, Hopper should be eulogised: as countercultural totem, as Republican, as drug addict, as psychopath, as troubled artist of questionable significance?¹⁸ In the weeks and months following these conflicted obituaries, public attention once again turned to a reappraisal of *Easy Rider*, with internet debate briefly flaring in June 2010 as to whether or not *Easy Rider*, in light of Hopper's shift towards Republican politics in later life (emblematised in his 1995 appearance in a Superbowl advertisement for Nike), should be read not as the antiauthoritarian rallying call it was taken as in its time, but rather as a work of deep-seated conservatism.¹⁹ In fact, this was hardly a new position. As early as 1986, Chris Hugo, in the essay "*Easy Rider* and Hollywood in the '70s," in *Movie*, linked the film's "conservative ideology" to Hopper's inability

¹⁷ Reading this list cannot help but bring to mind Kris Kristofferson's "The Pilgrim, Chapter 33", supposedly written of Hopper, and later invoked of Travis Bickle in what is perhaps Scorsese's extratextual closure of the New Hollywood moment: "He's a poet, he's a picker, he's a prophet, he's a pusher, He's a pilgrim and a preacher and a problem when he's stoned, He's a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction, Taking every wrong direction on his lonely way back home." For more on Hopper's many incarnations, and speculation as to what their sum total might signify, see Adrian Martin, "The Misleading Man: Dennis Hopper", in Angela Ndalians and Charlotte Henry (eds.), *Stars in Our Eyes: The Star Phenomenon in the Contemporary Era*, Praeger (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002), pp. 2-19.

¹⁸ Peter Biskind, "'I Was Scared to Death of Dennis': The Violence, the Drinking, the Drugs. It's a Wonder Dennis Hopper Made Any Films At All, Says Acclaimed Film Writer Peter Biskind", *The Times* (5 June 2010), p. 40.

¹⁹ See Anon, "'Easy Rider,' Right-Wing Classic?", *The New York Times* (8 June 2010). <<http://ideas.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/08/easy-rider-right-wing-classic/?scp=3&sq=%22easy%20rider%22&st=cse>>. (Accessed 11 August 2014); and Jesse Walker, "The Id and the Odyssey: The lives and deaths of Dennis Hopper", *Reason.com* (1 June 2010). <<http://reason.com/archives/2010/06/01/the-id-and-the-odyssey>>. (Accessed 11 October 2013).

to depart from a traditional Hollywood storytelling model.²⁰ Hugo argues that the film ultimately works within an “essentially conservative dramatic framework”.²¹ Furthermore, Hugo indicates that at no point does the editing of *Easy Rider* “fracture the unity of the narrative in [any] way,” and goes on to identify the ways in which the film plays with formal conventions, without ever moving outside a Classical framework or adopting alternative modes of practice. For example, *Easy Rider*’s aimless, alienated protagonists nevertheless exist within a goal-oriented narrative (their journey to New Orleans), even as they reject the trappings of the Hollywood’s traditional goals (financial security, heterosexual romance, the achievement of domestic stability) – Billy and Wyatt pull off their big score at the start, rather than the end, of the film, and then proceed to blow it. Derek Nystrom states that *Easy Rider*’s “loosely linked episodes... have little to no necessary relation to the protagonists’ intention of attending Mardi Gras,” and render “near irrelevant... the film’s ostensible goal”.²² On the one hand, the journey to New Orleans provides a narrative superstructure to the entire film, but the arbitrary depiction of this goal renders the destination more of a classical MacGuffin. Along the way, Billy and Wyatt are accompanied at various points by criminals, drug users, prostitutes and other morally-dubious types. While the screenplay demonises police officers and other accepted bastions of social worth, in a broader sense, the film inhabits a traditional, conservative moral landscape in which transgressors receive their comeuppance at the hands of fate.²³

Easy Rider never truly deviates from the three formal systems that David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson use to define the Classical Hollywood

²⁰ Chris Hugo, “*Easy Rider* and Hollywood in the ‘70s”, *Movie*, 31/32 (1986), p. 70.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 67.

²² Derek Nystrom, “The New Hollywood”, in Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann and Art Simon (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film Vol. III: 1946-1975* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 421-22.

²³ Hugo, p. 70.

Cinema. These systems are “a system of [causal] narrative logic,” “a system of cinematic time” and “a system of cinematic space”.²⁴ *Easy Rider* progresses in a linear chronology, with consecutive scenes representing a continuous assemblage of characters interacting in spatially-coherent environments. Hopper’s appropriation of avant-garde aesthetic flourishes are usually motivated by the story, and do not break the Classical mode of the film. The most obvious example of this is the acid trip sequence that occurs in the New Orleans cemetery towards the end of the film. The preceding Mardi Gras montage sequence has demonstrated how the characters have come to be in the graveyard, and Wyatt’s retrieval of the drug has been clearly foreshadowed by the earlier words with which Luke Askew’s hitchhiker bestowed the drug upon him earlier in the film: “when you get to the right place, with the right people, quarter this.” Thus, as the film descends into an assemblage of quick cuts, zooms, overexposures and disembodied voiceovers, the transition into a psychedelic visual realm has been clearly signalled on a narrative level. And unlike the audio-visual collages that inspired Hopper (namely, the work of his close friend Bruce Conner), Hopper’s drug trip never leaves the cinematic space of the New Orleans cemetery and its surrounding locales. Nor does it incorporate or recontextualise footage from other cinematic spaces or sources, Conner’s stylistic trademark. Therefore, the representation of the drug trip at no point interrupts the clear unfolding of *Easy Rider*’s story.

The screenplay of *Easy Rider* is fragmented into discrete, self-contained episodes. The film consists primarily of dialogue scenes between its two protagonists, and the individuals they encounter in different locations on their motorcycle journey. Each shift to a new spatial location is indicated by use of a travelogue-style montage sequence. Of the 47 scenes in the film, fourteen are montage sequences, and all but

²⁴ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, p. 6.

five of those depict the protagonists travelling on motorcycles. Generally, the montage sequences consist of rapidly cut, moving camera shots of Billy and Wyatt riding their motorcycles through lyrical landscapes, accompanied on the soundtrack by contemporary popular rock songs. The use of such sequences is consistent with Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's Classical model of narrative, as they indicate to the viewer a shift in cinematic space and time, thus maintaining the causal narrative logic of the film. Yet the geographical specifics are by and large elusive. Visually appealing as they are, these montage sequences function in a context that is sealed-off from the narrative proper, conveying no more information to the audience than "we are on the move." As such, for the duration of each montage sequence, the audience is free to enjoy the pure visual spectacle of motorcycles on the open road. These sequences play as a veritable index of the variety of contemporary American settings inhabited by *Easy Rider*, taking in landscapes both natural (rustic pine forests and mountain range, the mesas of Monument Valley, sheep and horses roaming the countryside), and manmade (small towns, billboards and shopfronts [more often than not adorned with American flags], motels, gas stations, railyards and bridges). Cinematographer László Kovács' liberal use of zooms and lens flares, along with "the use of a hand-held camera which caresses the objects" of its focus, prompts the audience "to place a fetish value on the bikes," according to Hugo.²⁵ Certainly the repeated camera movements along expanses of motorcycle chrome, accompanied by use of dynamic editing and non-diegetic rock music permit these sequences to be enjoyed as exercises in visual pleasure, just as his lyrical shots of the natural environment spectacularise the setting. In this way, the use of motorcycle montage sequences in *Easy Rider* finds a strange counterpart in the song and dance sequence of the Hollywood musical. As explained by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, "for

²⁵ Hugo, p. 70.

the most part [within the musical film], space and time remain... classically coherent. The bursts of stylisation (a Busby Berkeley number, a [Rouben] Mamoulian rhythmic passage...) remain tied to the classical norm in that the norm defines the duration and range of permissible stylisation".²⁶ Much like the instances of intermittent stylisation that define the musical film, *Easy Rider*'s montage scenes function as exercises in visual spectacle sealed off from, but not operating in contradiction to, the dominant mode of storytelling of the film. Instead of song and dance, *Easy Rider* offers motorcycles and rock songs. The pairing of these images with a soundtrack featuring such commercially successful groups and artists as The Band, The Byrds, Jimi Hendrix, and Roger McGuinn from The Byrds, performing a song written by Bob Dylan for the film, offered another fruitful avenue for exploitation, and later merchandising in the form of the soundtrack album.²⁷ Crucially, these montage sequences never veer into avant-garde or narratively unmotivated territory (at which point they would begin to work against Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's Classical style). Instead, the narrative shape of *Easy Rider* offers a structure against which these musical sequences are laid out. In this regard, the structure of *Easy Rider* recalls what Tom Gunning has termed "the cinema of attractions," a term he applies to films produced between the emergence of the earliest actuality films in the late nineteenth century, and the triumph of narrative cinema in the late nineteen-teens.²⁸ Gunning states that the central aspect of the cinema of attractions is that it, "sees cinema less as a way of telling stories than as a way of presenting a series of views to an audience,"

²⁶ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, p. 71.

²⁷ Although *The Graduate* had notably also incorporated the songs of Simon and Garfunkel into its soundtrack, *Easy Rider* utilised contemporary popular songs in a way that was unprecedented in the New Hollywood moment, but would become a hallmark of later films such as *Mean Streets* (dir. Martin Scorsese, Warner Bros., 1973). In fact, Crosby Stills & Nash were initially enlisted to provide an original score for *Easy Rider*, which was later rejected in favour of the temporary tracks used in the picture edit (see Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, pp. 72-73.) Despite the significance of *Easy Rider*'s soundtrack to the New Hollywood moment, as Katherine Spring shows, the origins of the cross-promotional possibilities in the motion picture/pop-song tie-in date back to the earliest days of sound film. See Katherine Spring, "Pop Go the Warner Bros., et al.: Marketing Film Songs during the Coming of Sound", *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Fall 2008), pp. 68-89.

²⁸ Gunning.

motivated not with the intention of imparting narrative exposition or a diegetically-sealed world, but predicated simply upon, “its ability to *show* something”.²⁹ The travelogue montage episodes of *Easy Rider* function in a self-contained way within the broader narrative, as demonstrative representations of its American setting and, on a narrative level, as an indication that its protagonists arrive in another locale, or meet another traveller. Such are the workings of *Easy Rider*’s episodic structure. *Easy Rider* is far from unique in this regard. Richard Maltby and Ian Craven extend Gunning’s “cinema of attractions” theory beyond its early cinema focus, stating, “that nearly every [Hollywood] movie has at least one sequence which displays action or physical expertise as a production value, interrupting narrative and challenging its dominance,” drawing examples from the “Make ‘Em Laugh” sequence from *Singin’ in the Rain* (dir. Gene Kelly, Stanley Donen, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1952) and the car chase from *Bullitt* (dir. Peter Yates, Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, 1968).³⁰

One other curious idiosyncrasy of *Easy Rider*’s cinematic style is its use of flash cuts. Occurring five times in the course of the film, these sequences occur at the end of a scene, and are marked by rapid cutting back and forth between the final shot of the scene that is ending, and the first shot of the subsequent scene. For instance, the first instance of flash cutting occurs just before the ten minute mark of the film, as Billy and Wyatt are denied accommodation at a motel, and return to the freeway. As the camera holds on the long shot of the motorcycles taking to the highway, the film cuts for a number of frames to a medium shot of Billy and Wyatt sitting at a campfire, before cutting back to the shot of the motorcycles on the highway. The rapidly-cut inserts of the men at the fire flickers on screen two more times, and then remains onscreen as the next scene begins, Billy and Wyatt sitting by the campfire smoking marijuana and discussing their planned journey to Mardi Gras. Another noteworthy

²⁹ Ibid, p. 64, emphasis in original.

³⁰ Maltby and Craven, *Hollywood Cinema*, pp. 238-242.

instance of flash cutting comes as Billy and Wyatt wait in the opulent antechamber of the New Orleans brothel, and as Wyatt reads a parchment inscribed with the Joseph Addison quote, “death only closes a man’s reputation and determines it as good or bad”. As Wyatt reflects on these words, the film cuts from his close-up to the final shot of the film, a helicopter shot flying away from the flaming wreckage of his motorcycle. This shot remains on screen for less than a second, and cuts back to the close-up of Wyatt, inexpressive as he apparently reflects on his own mortality. This is a rare instance of the fracturing of *Easy Rider*’s essentially realist mode; there is no way that Wyatt could have realistically experienced this premonition of the specifics of his own demise, and there is a degree of ambiguity as to whether this flash-forward takes place within his own psychological state, or if it is an instance of the film commenting upon itself. In the latter regard, this particular flash cut hints at the kind of self-referentiality play that would become a central function of Hopper’s subsequent film, *The Last Movie*.

Unlike the use of motorcycle montage sequences and the acid trip sequence, the use of these flash cuts is unjustified on a narrative level, representing instead a curious stylistic innovation on the part of Hopper. The flickering effect it conveys, transitioning uneasily between scenes, can perhaps be interpreted as simulating the psychological effects of an LSD-triggered flashback. Stylistically, it also directly foreshadows the acid trip sequence at the end of the film, as the departure from a continuity-based, spatially coherent cinematic style of that particular sequence directly intrudes into the breaks between conventionally represented scenes elsewhere in the film. These strange edits, and their effect of approximating the experience of psychedelic drug use, have gone unremarked in analyses of *Easy Rider*, although Hopper himself in a 1969 interview with L.M. Kit Carson contrasted his use of the flash cut with his avoidance of dissolve. “Now’s not a time for that [using dissolves].

There are no superimpositions in the film, no dissolves, we don't have time for that now - now just direct-cut it".³¹ In his director's commentary film that accompanies the *Easy Rider* DVD, Hopper does not elaborate on his intention behind the flash cuts, other than briefly mentioning that his use of "direct cutting" was inspired, ambiguously, by "the Europeans".³² In both instances it is unclear as to whether by "direct cutting" Hopper is talking specifically about the use of these flash cuts, or his simple refusal to use fades between sequences, consistently favouring hard cuts. At any rate, despite the absence of narrative motivation, the stylistic abstraction of the flash cut does not subvert the narrative logic, space or time of *Easy Rider's* storytelling. Therefore, Hopper's occasionally unmotivated, abstract editing practices do not disqualify the film from consideration as a work of Classical Hollywood style.

Of course, a conservative cinematic style can still be employed to represent progressive subject matter, and accusations of radicalism levelled at *Easy Rider* had more to do with its thematic and narrative focus than Hopper's somewhat superficial appropriation of avant-garde flourishes. As the stylistic conceits of *Easy Rider* can be firmly situated as operating within a Classical Hollywood model, it is time to interrogate the assumed radicalism of its thematic content. Just as Hopper adorns his stylistically Classical film with pseudo-avant-garde touches, *Easy Rider* similarly hedges its bets when it comes to its representations of its protagonists and the moral landscape they inhabit.

Being primarily concerned with the burgeoning late-1960s counterculture, alienated outsiders, and a simmering sense of national discontent (not to mention more obvious throwbacks to its salacious exploitation roots in the form of representations of sexual activity and drug consumption), it not difficult to see how *Easy Rider* was taken, in its time, as a radical work. With the benefit of historical

³¹ Carson, in Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews*, p. 20.

³² Dennis Hopper, audio commentary, *Easy Rider* DVD, Columbia TriStar Home Video Australia, 2000.

distance, however, an air of uncertainty becomes audible in Billy and Wyatt's statements on what has gone awry in their homeland. What is most keenly felt in an otherwise strangely muted film (no matter how loud the songs on its soundtrack) is a longing for an earlier America. But what kind of nation does *Easy Rider* yearn for? Ultimately, *Easy Rider* finds itself caught between two poles, unable to commit to either. Billy and Wyatt are in search of what used to make America, in George Hanson's words, "a helluva good country," but neither Hanson nor the film can articulate what now-lost characteristics made the United States great. Although the film is visually expressive in its depictions of American roadways, bridges, monuments, and mountain ranges (which Barbara Klinger links with the tradition of patriotism-inflating photo-journalist puff-pieces that were common-place in the pages of *National Geographic* magazine in the mid-1960s), the film becomes as inarticulate as its memorably mono-syllabic characters when attempting to assert its position within a broader political debate as to how, exactly, America has faltered.³³ Certainly, to borrow its tagline, *Easy Rider*'s (anti)heroes have gone "looking for America," but they seemingly have only themselves to blame when they are subsequently unable to "find it anywhere." After moving on from the commune where they are welcomed to stay and enjoy the life on the land (despite the questionable agricultural practices of its inhabitants), Billy and Wyatt jettison their seemingly like-minded hitch-hiker, and pick up George Hanson, "shorthaired lawyer who is part of the establishment," a man clearly struggling with his own demons (alcoholism, a troubled relationship with his father [echoes of Fonda senior], and by association, the pressure of expectations weighing down upon American Civil Liberties Union lawyer clearly out of step with long-held values in his small Southern town).³⁴ George first makes Billy and Wyatt's acquaintance as their cellmate, instantly throwing his lot in with these two perpetual

³³ Barbara Klinger, "The Road to Dystopia: Landscaping the nation in *Easy Rider*", in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds.), *The Road Movie Book* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 179-203.

³⁴ Hopper, audio commentary.

losers, accepting the role of self-imposed outsider alongside his newfound motorcyclist friends, and attracting the scorn of the rednecks who will later take his life. The film leaves us with three misfits, choosing exile and isolation, spurning the ready-made social groups they have the opportunity to join. Where Klinger and others incorrectly identify Billy and Wyatt as hippies, the film clearly establishes that its protagonists do not assimilate into the hippie counterculture, nor the pastoral life, the criminal underworld that bankrolls their journey, or the biker culture that offers them their mode of transportation, if not any kind of cross-cultural solidarity.³⁵ As David E. James indicates, if *Easy Rider* was committed to the values of the counterculture, its “endorsement of the commune would have brought the film to a halt right there”.³⁶ Of course, Billy and Wyatt’s nomadic nature provides narrative propulsion. Nystrom expands on this point, saying that in “adhering to its road movie ethos [rather than the commune], *Easy Rider* remains indebted to the forward drive of classical narrative, even if here this drive is largely unmotivated”.³⁷ Spurning possible solidarity with established social groups, Billy and Wyatt nonetheless forge a meaningful bond with George Hanson. Imprisoned and alienated from his father, George’s marginalisation to the role of outsider casts him in opposition to the hitchhiker, who accepts his place in the commune, while Billy and Wyatt choose to move on. Unable to comfortably occupy any of the established modes of American life on offer, the film’s only

³⁵ There is also the question of *Easy Rider*’s belatedness, being one of the first Hollywood films to openly address the counterculture even as it anticipated the Altamont Speedway disaster, an event often considered to have closed the 1960s and the countercultural moment. This ties in to Hopper and Fonda’s status, for all their self-conscious attempts to be perceived as Hollywood outsiders, as industry *insiders*, Fonda the son of Hollywood royalty, and Hopper having been in and out of the studio system for over a decade. Despite their attempts to adopt its clothing and lingo, Hopper and Fonda were still Hollywood types, not committed members of the counterculture. For this reason, J. Hoberman cynically labels *Easy Rider* as a “costume movie” and “a lifestyle advertisement - an invitation for a generation to dress up and play Davy Crocket once more”. See J. Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, p. 197, 236. James Benning is even more scathing when he says of the film “these guys were really a bunch of Hollywood brats that were making a film that was going to make a lot of money making-believe they knew what that counter-culture was all about”. See Dennis Lim, “First Look: James Benning”, *BOMBLOG* (2013). <<http://bombsite.com/issues/1000/articles/7046>>. (Accessed 12 March 2013).

³⁶ David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NH: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 18., cited in Nystrom, “The New Hollywood”, p. 422.

³⁷ Nystrom, “The New Hollywood”, p. 423.

recourse for its (anti)heroes is that of violent death. Far from being a triumphant clarion-call of the counter-culture, the message of *Easy Rider* could just as easily be taken as ‘this is America. Assimilate or die.’ This sentiment is encapsulated in the initial working title of the film, *The Loners*, which was eventually discarded in favour of Terry Southern’s snappy double-entendre.³⁸

Beyond the depiction of their actions, Billy and Wyatt are drawn in such limited psychological detail that it is impossible to read them as anything other than archetypes: Billy as paranoiac, desperate to get away with his loot, suspicious of all who cross his path; Wyatt as calm, aloof seer, seemingly privy to hidden knowledge (as evidenced by the flash-forward in the brothel scene to the flaming wreckage of his motorcycle, and his prophetic, oft-quoted line in the film’s penultimate scene, “we blew it”), and acquiescing, riding on, untroubled, towards his doom. Whereas Billy consistently exhibits a feverish desire to constantly be in motion (“I got to get out of here, man. We got things we want to do, man,”) Wyatt displays a constant sensitivity to his surroundings, demonstrated in the associational montage of him picking through detritus on the ground the morning after the first campfire scene in the film. This gesture is repeated in the New Orleans cemetery sequence when he crouches to admire a dead bird on the footpath. Wyatt’s character is hinted at in another shot of him standing alone on an outcropping, gazing at distant mountains after swimming in the rockpool at the New Buffalo-inspired hippie commune. In the director’s commentary, Hopper explains that his directorial vision for Wyatt centred on giving the character a “special kind of feeling, a feeling of being alone, a feeling of being able to contemplate nature”.³⁹

³⁸ Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, p. 192.

³⁹ Hopper, audio commentary.

The fact that Jack Nicholson's George Hanson was rendered in significantly greater psychological depth than either Billy and Wyatt was no accident, or quirk determined by Nicholson's skills as an actor. Hopper would tell L.M. Kit Carson,

You run into Jack Nicholson and the whole picture changes. He's the only one constructed to be three-dimensional, the only character whose background and present situation are developed... You learn an awful lot about him... You asked earlier if Peter represented America. No, actually Jack is America: he's trapped America, killing himself... Luke Askew... Not important. You get no background on the two hookers. You don't know what the commune is really into. Obviously I wanted you to get closest to Jack.⁴⁰

While Hopper rationalised the degree of psychological development afforded to Nicholson's Hanson on these grounds, on the other hand, the decision to withhold the expository details of Billy and Wyatt's backgrounds was made retrospectively. Terry Southern's original screenplay for *Easy Rider* opened with a prologue that established Billy and Wyatt's backstory as motorcycle daredevils in the employ of a travelling circus. The screenplay began with their dismissal from this job, prompting their drug deal-funded cross-country trek towards retirement.⁴¹ Andrew Schroeder points out that had these earlier scenes remained intact, *Easy Rider* would be a very different film, demonstrating its class-consciousness and engagement with contemporary labour struggles.⁴² By beginning the film with its protagonists rejecting their gainful, working-class employment, and concluding their freedom march with their deaths at the hands of fellow blue-collar duck hunters, Southern's *Easy Rider* would have resonated as an indictment on the strangleholds of capitalism on individual freedoms.

⁴⁰ Carson, in Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews*, pp. 20-21.

⁴¹ Although it does not make its way into the 1969 Signet paperback edition of the *Easy Rider* screenplay, Dennis Hopper talks in numerous interviews about how Terry Southern's original screenplay opened with a prologue detailing the termination of Billy and Wyatt's employment.

⁴² Andrew Schroeder, "The Movement Inside: BBS Films and the Cultural Left in the New Hollywood", in Van Gosse and Richard R. Moser (eds.), *The World the Sixties Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), pp. 120-122.

As it is, *Easy Rider*, as filmed, very deliberately removes its characters from a capitalist framework by refusing to clarify what position, if any, its protagonists ever occupied in their working lives. This, in turn, dilates the focus of the film to broader issues of national identity, as its characters can only be taken as representative types, as visual symbols. Hopper has said of this:

All you really know about Captain America and Billy is that they sell cocaine, smoke grass, ride bikes... To explain all that [exposition] is disturbing to me. I hate to *explain* who everyone is at great length... I hope that if you watch the characters, just watch them, you can understand all you need... All I wanted was for you to be comfortable with Captain America and Billy, just so you wouldn't mind crossing the country with them.⁴³

With no expository information about Billy and Wyatt's backgrounds being revealed to the audience, the motivations for their drug dealing and motorcycle journey are left in the dark, leaving them "dislocated and almost purely allegorical, without psychology or even personal history to match their obvious national-mythic symbolism," as their journey away from working life and its consequences can take centre-stage.⁴⁴

The social attitudes on display in *Easy Rider* are further complicated by consideration of its representation of its wider cast of characters. On the one hand, the film seeks to champion a fundamentally decent American lifestyle shared by simple, "salt of the earth" people, such as the members of the hippie commune, and the rancher, who Wyatt warmly tells, "you've got a nice place. It's not every man that can live off the land, you know. You do your own thing in your own time. You should be proud." But what separates this farming family encountered in Southern California, who welcome Billy and Wyatt to their table, from overall-clad rednecks

⁴³ Carson, in Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews*, p. 21.

⁴⁴ Schroeder, p. 121.

who taunt Billy and Wyatt in the Louisiana café (“they got fancy bikes. That’s some Yankee queers. Check the flag on that bike,”), beat George to death, and blast our heroes from their motorcycles? Of course, the difference is the geographical specificity of the South, and all the connotations that region suggested to progressively-minded audiences of 1969. The great white elephant at the heart of *Easy Rider* is the question of race. Although the film exhibits no hesitation in representing its outlaw protagonists engaging in such pressingly contemporary activities as illicit drug use, confronting police officers, practicing free love, and discussing government conspiracies, the film is reluctant to broach the issue of race in 1969’s USA. The spectre of race is visible everywhere on the fringes of the film, from George Hanson’s occupation as civil rights lawyer, to the contrast between the slum-like former slave quarters that are juxtaposed with enormous mansions in the Louisiana motorcycle montage sequences, to the dialogue of the truckers in the café: “I wish you could mate him up with one of those black wenches... and that’s about as low as they come.” Despite this, the only time the issue of race is directly addressed by any of the central characters is when George Hanson, upon meeting his new cellmates Billy and Wyatt, assures them that with his legal expertise, he will be able to get them out of there assuming that they “haven’t killed anybody. At least, nobody white.” This line, coming at the end of a lengthy dialogue scene, is quickly followed by a cut to the subsequent scene, giving Billy and Wyatt no chance to reply to George’s sardonic remark, thus denying an opportunity for the film to engage with the issue of race, and trivialising the comment to the status of a punch line. The studied avoidance of reference to race is continued with the absence of African American speaking roles in the film. The only African American individuals seen in the film are in the film’s montage sequences, specifically those set in the South, where black individuals and families are shown standing by the roadside,

occasionally waving at the camera as it passes by. In addition, African American street musicians are shown performing in the New Orleans Mardi Gras montage sequence, and at one point, Billy is shown in medium shot exchanging words with an unidentified African American man. Crucially, the diegetic audio is obscured by the non-diegetic use of a ragtime rendition of “When the Saints Go Marching In,” as the film once again retreats from engaging with the politics of race.⁴⁵ Experimental filmmaker James Benning takes issue with what he considers the offensively simplistic consideration of race relations and west/south dichotomy in Hopper’s *Easy Rider*, in turn questioning the ethical ramifications of Hopper’s direction of non-professional performers in the Louisiana café sequence:

Some of the things in *Easy Rider* that I actually had a difficult time with was mainly black poverty in the South and the way that the original *Easy Rider* somewhat projects the West as being good and the South as being bad. All Westerns are this way also. There is this prejudice against the South. The restaurant scene, Hopper told the extras that played the bullies in the restaurant that these bikers were coming through played by those guys and that they had just raped a white woman outside of town. So their reaction to them is to a story that really doesn’t exist in the film. So it is a baiting of a prejudice, and they fell right into the trap.⁴⁶

In the documentary *Easy Rider: Shaking the Cage* (dir. Charles Kiselyak, Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 1999) that accompanies the DVD release of *Easy Rider*, Hopper discusses the issue of race, albeit in a roundabout manner. He admits that, “for years I was criticised,” for not casting an African American performer in the role

⁴⁵ Elaine M. Bapis states that an earlier, unfiled draft of the *Easy Rider* screenplay contained a sequence of Billy and Wyatt “befriending a pack of black cyclists who ‘lend them some gasoline’ and share a joint”. Whether or not this scene was ever filmed (perhaps it is one of the many sequences excised from Hopper’s 220-minute cut) is undetermined. See Elaine M. Bapis, *Camera and Action: American Film As Agent of Social Change, 1965-1975* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), p. 225.

⁴⁶ Lim.

of George Hanson, but justifies casting Nicholson, “because [had an African American performer been cast] it would be too obvious that there would have been a reason for them to kill us at that time because of the racial implications of going into the South. But, in point of fact, we didn’t need to be black, we just needed to have long hair”.⁴⁷ Later in the same documentary, Hopper says of the killing of the George Hanson character at the hands of the Southern rednecks, “I wanted them to kill one of their own. I wanted America to kill their own son [sic]”.⁴⁸ At no point does Hopper address his equally contentious depiction of women, who throughout *Easy Rider* are marginalised into domestic or sexualised roles (either as mother/housewife, as in the ranch sequence, or as prostitute/available lover, as in the brothel and commune sequences. Molly Haskell views *Easy Rider* as a typifying Hollywood’s reaction to “the growing strength and demands of women in real life, spear-headed by women’s liberation... [with] an escape into the all-male world of the buddy film”.⁴⁹

In his consistent appropriation of loaded symbols throughout the film, Hopper complicates the sense of ideological incoherence of *Easy Rider*. In the DVD commentary, Hopper sums up his directorial vision for the art design of the film as such: “the idea of the motorcycles, the idea of the American flag, the idea of me in buckskins, and Jack in his football helmet: all these things were like symbols of a time that I’d lived, and part of the pop culture”.⁵⁰ Indeed, none of the film’s episodes are drawn in sufficient psychological terms to enable reading on anything other than a symbolic, or purely visual level. Symbolically-loaded gestures seem tossed into the film liberally, and seemingly at random. For instance, Wyatt’s star-spangled jumpsuit and motorcycle connotes jingoism, nationalism, and Manifest Destiny. Rick Altman

⁴⁷ Dennis Hopper interview, *Shaking the Cage* (dir. Charles Kiselyak, Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 1999), *Easy Rider* DVD, Columbia TriStar Home Video Australia, 2000.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), p. 323.

⁵⁰ Hopper, audio commentary.

views Fonda's costuming as deliberately undermining "shared belief in American causes and coherence," and interprets Wyatt's act of draping the dying Billy with his flag-adorned jacket as "parodying the common Vietnam-era image of a flag-shrouded coffin".⁵¹ Of the early scene in the film, in which Wyatt conceals his ill-gotten gains in his motorcycle gas tank (decorated with the colouration of the American flag), Hopper says, "I was conflicted at this time about the symbolism of America, [and] against the war in Vietnam, so the idea of putting all of the money in a gas tank that had an American flag on it, and the idea that we were destroying ourselves, and this beautiful chrome machine that we lived in, the United States [sic]".⁵² In *Shaking the Cage*, Peter Fonda more bluntly refers to this action as "fucking the flag with money".⁵³ Nevertheless, free from any concrete narrative context, the use of such symbols as the American flag serves to confuse, rather than clarify, *Easy Rider's* position within the political spectrum, making it difficult to assess the motives of the movie as anything other than pictorial catalogue of the imagery of its times. Indeed, Hopper reflects that his primary intention with the film was to deliver a "fable of what was happening at that time".⁵⁴

Just as *Easy Rider* borrows liberally from the iconography of its cultural moment, it also strives to combine disparate elements of the cinematic past. In both his director's commentary, and the *Shaking the Cage* documentary, Hopper states that from the project's inception, he always "thought of [*Easy Rider*] as a... classic kind of Western... [concerned with] two loners, two gunfighters, two outlaws".⁵⁵ *Easy Rider* does consistently nod to the Western with its narrative preoccupation with men astride steeds undertaking a cross country journey (albeit one that is directionally reversed, with the protagonists setting off from California and heading east) through a

⁵¹ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), p. 201.

⁵² Hopper, audio commentary.

⁵³ Peter Fonda interview, *Shaking the Cage*.

⁵⁴ Hopper, audio commentary.

⁵⁵ Hopper, *Shaking the Cage*.

geographically-varied succession of landscapes, stopping between towns to rest by campfire. Elsewhere, Billy persistently acts out Western clichés (as when he tells Wyatt in an early scene, that they are “out here in the wilderness, fighting Indians and cowboys on every side,” or when he participates in a pantomime gun battle with the children at the hippie commune). Even the names of the protagonists are allusive of Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp, exhibiting loose character traits associated with the historical figures (Billy’s impulsiveness contrasting with Wyatt’s aloof wisdom), pointing to the inherent incompatibility of outlaw with Presbyterian gunfighter, while also once again invoking the spectre of Old Hollywood in the absent presence of Wyatt Earp himself, Henry Fonda.

Released amidst growing recognition of the United States’ history of genocide (a movement that would gain momentum in the months following the release of *Easy Rider* with the occupation of the former Alcatraz Prison site by Native American activists in November 1969, and the ensuing birth of the Red Power movement), *Easy Rider* could be taken as a formative step towards the burgeoning Revisionist Western, along with the contemporaneous *The Wild Bunch* (dir. Sam Peckinpah, Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, 1969) and *Little Big Man* (dir. Arthur Penn, National General Pictures, 1970). The most explicit reference to this history comes in the campfire scene Billy and Wyatt share with the hitchhiker early in the film, who sternly tells the protagonists that, “the people this place belongs to are buried right under you.”

Elsewhere, *Easy Rider* adopts visual characteristics associated with the Western, at a time when that status of that genre as Hollywood’s nostalgic space was under threat due to the recognition of the problem of genocide. Hopper refers to the montage scenes shot in Monument Valley as, “John Ford country”.⁵⁶ Yet given that these Western landscapes are generally relegated to the discursively sealed context of

⁵⁶ Hopper, audio commentary.

the motorcycle montage sequences, *Easy Rider* reduces the iconography of the Western to a travelogue of visual pleasures, something to be gazed upon from a passing motorcycle.

Much like his muddled attempts to combine different cultural symbols within the art design of *Easy Rider*, Hopper exhibits equal fearlessness in recontextualising material inspired by diverse cinematic sources. In his DVD director's commentary, Hopper admits that at the time of directing *Easy Rider*, he "was very interested in making the first American art film".⁵⁷ To that end, as well as acknowledging the influence of Western directors such as John Hughes, Howard Hawks, and John Huston, Hopper also cites particular scenes as inspired by the work of such international art house fixtures as Satyajit Rai and Luis Buñuel; in a rare moment of humility, Hopper refers to the scene in which Billy and Wyatt's changing of a motorcycle tyre is intercut with two farmers re-shoeing a horse as "Buñuel at his worst".⁵⁸ Both Hopper and Fonda exhibited no hesitancy in courting their European influences after the fact. Confusing Antonioni with Federico Fellini (Fonda telling interviewers Tony Reif and Iain Ewing that he wished it was Fellini, rather than Antonioni, who had watched his film), Fonda recounted Antonioni's reaction after watching *Easy Rider*: "he came out and said, 'it's the most honest film that's come out of America that I've ever seen...'. And he went around telling everybody else about it too".⁵⁹ Yet as analysis of *Easy Rider*'s cinematic style has demonstrated, despite drawing influence from the international art cinema, employing narrative fragmentation and the use of self-contained vignette episodes, impact cutting, and ostensibly avant-garde flash-forward acid trip editing constructions, *Easy Rider* can still be comfortably catalogued as a conventional (albeit episodic) Hollywood

⁵⁷ Hopper, audio commentary.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Tony Reif and Iain Ewing, "Fonda", *Take One*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (January-February 1969, pub. 28 September 1969), p. 10.

narrative. Similarly, in its depiction of broad caricatures, *Easy Rider* could in fact qualify for inclusion in one of the oldest genres of all (cinematic or otherwise) - the morality tale. J.F.X. Gillis says of the conclusion of the film,

If this narrative had been Medieval, could there be any doubt at all of the theme or the moral teaching intended? Sinners wander the countryside on a secular quest, encountering God's message but failing to acknowledge Him. They seek worldly pleasure at the expense of spiritual fulfilment, finding treasure and discussing it under a tree, only to finally to die a horrid death by the wayside.⁶⁰

While it does accommodate this Biblical fire-and-brimstone cautionary tale, first and foremost *Easy Rider* plays as a tale of the alienation of its protagonists. Whether the sympathies of the film fall on the side of its protagonists, or America at large, seems to be left up to the interpretation of the viewer, who may read the film as either outpouring of countercultural rage (as "powerful statement about intolerance and conformity and the repressed rage among the exploited yahoos of the American underclass"), or as a definitive explication of "Hollywood's nihilistic themes and chaotic styles".⁶¹ Hopper himself acknowledged the ambivalence in his representation of his protagonists, with the notably qualified statement "Somewhere I gradually wanted you to sort of like them [Billy and Wyatt] - not necessarily identify too

⁶⁰ J.F.X. Gillis, "They Blew It: The Secret of 'Easy Rider'", *Newsvine* (12 December 2007). <http://jfxgillis.newsvine.com/_news/2007/12/12/1146900-they-blew-it-the-secret-of-easy-rider>. (Accessed 16 October 2013).

⁶¹ Gillis. Pauline Kael saw Hollywood's embrace of such chaotic nihilism as entirely cynical: "Much of the hopelessness in movies like *if...* [dir. Lindsay Anderson, Paramount Pictures, 1968] and *Easy Rider* and *Medium Cool* [dir. Haskell Wexler, Paramount Pictures, 1969] and the new thrillers that kill off their protagonists is probably dictated not by a consideration of actual alternatives and the conclusion that there's no hope but simply by what seems daring and new and photogenic. The moviemakers, concerned primarily with the look of their movies, may not even realise that audiences are - rightly, I think - becoming resentful of the self-serving negativism. The audience is probably just as much aware of the manipulation for the sake of beautiful violent imagery as it was of the manipulation when Hollywood gave it nothing but happy endings, and it probably knows that these apocalyptic finishes are just as much of a con". From Pauline Kael, "The Beauty of Destruction", *The New Yorker* (1 February 1970), reprinted in Kael, *Deeper Into Movies* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 117.

closely with them, but accept them enough so you could lose them in the end".⁶²

Fonda even more explicitly articulated his position on the moral stance of the film in an interview with Tony Reif and Iain Ewing, in turn giving credence to Gillis' interpretation of the film as cautionary allegory:

You have that moral problem in *Easy Rider*, you know, about being hard narcotics dealers, without a care in the world and we're beautiful heroes... people that you can identify with, that you want to be... you want to be like them, you want to look like them, you want a chance to do what they're doing... and when you come together at the end and they're killed, you still can't get it together – 'you' being the establishment - can't get it together, man, how about you can *like* this kind of person, feel sad about their death and shocked, and yet they're the *most* immoral people you can pick up in America.⁶³

Andrew Sarris' fantastically titled *Village Voice* piece "From Soap Opera to Dope Opera" set the tone for the generally hostile reception that Billy and Wyatt's characterisations received from mainstream film critics, stating, "I refuse to believe that a pair of heroin-hustling bikers with manners almost as bad as their diction should be treated as sacred cows beyond criticism, judgment, or disbelief"; Sarris reserved particular bile for Fonda's Captain America, who he labelled, "spoiled, jaded, corrupt, and probably too stoned to see beyond his own sordid self-concern to the tortured American landscape he litters more than he inhabits".⁶⁴ Time has not necessarily cooled this impassioned reading of the film: James Benning, speaking in 2013, offers one of the harshest criticisms of the film's protagonists, which is nevertheless compatible with Hopper and Fonda's ambivalent intentions. Says

⁶² Carson, in Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews*, p. 21.

⁶³ Reif and Ewing, p. 7, emphasis in original.

⁶⁴ Andrew Sarris, "From Soap Opera to Dope Opera", *The Village Voice* (14 August 1969), p. 35. <http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2010/07/easy_rider_from.php>. (Accessed 23 October 2013).

Benning, “It’s just a couple of selfish guys that have no politics whatsoever. They prove Malcolm X’s manifesto that drugs are anti-revolutionary. They are a couple of disgusting guys”.⁶⁵ Joseph Morgenstern, in his *Newsweek* review, was more tempered in his language than Benning, but expresses similar sentiments:

They’ve [Billy and Wyatt] gotten the money for their odyssey by pushing dope. Their machines help pollute the fragile land with fumes and noise, though you might not know it from a succession of lyrical transitional passages in which the only thing that pours out of their exhaust stacks is folk music.... But they are trying to go straight, to become relatively harmless people. And their supposedly straight compatriots - we, the other people, the great unwashed masses - cannot abide their troubling presence. That is the true subject matter of *Easy Rider*: the wanton destruction of harmlessness.⁶⁶

Clearly, Morgenstern’s sympathies have been more successfully enlisted than Benning’s, begging the central question of the extent to which a film requires its viewers to identify with the actions of its protagonists, a proposition which is exacerbated in *Easy Rider* by the audience star-identification of Fonda and Hopper, and the streamlined, spectacular nature of its rock and roll motorcycle montage sequences.⁶⁷ Hopper was directly taken to task over *Easy Rider*’s ambivalence by L.M. Kit Carson in the following exchange:

[Hopper]: I’m saying that Peter, as Captain America, is the Slightly Tarnished Lawman, is the sensitive, off-in-the-stars, the Great White Liberal who keeps saying, ‘Everything’s going to work out,’ but doesn’t do anything to help it work out. He goes to the commune, hears the people have been eating dead horses off the side of the road - does he break any of that fifty thousand out of

⁶⁵ Lim.

⁶⁶ Joseph Morgenstern, “*Easy Rider: On the Road*”, *Newsweek* (1969), reprinted in Joseph Morgenstern and Stefan Kanfer (eds.), *Film 69/70* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 36.

⁶⁷ Similar questions of star identification and audience identification will be explored later in my examination of *The French Connection* and *Dirty Harry*.

his gas tank? What does he do? Nothing. 'Hey, they're going to make it.' Hey, the Negroes, the Indians, the Mexicans are going to make it. What does he do? He rides a couple of girls over to another place because he's eating their food. *He does nothing.*

Finally he realises this when he says, 'We blew it.' 'We blew it' means to me that they could have spent that energy in something other than smuggling cocaine, could have done something other than help the society destroy itself. [Carson]: All right. But I wonder whether this disfavour you've just explained toward Captain America comes across in the movie. I've seen the movie four times, and only the last time did I *begin* to pick up some ambivalence towards Captain America in the commune sequence. I'm asking you as a filmmaker, could you have made it more clear how you wanted us to feel about Captain America - just done it in that one sequence which, I think, is very crucial? Because when Captain America says, 'They're going to make it,' a lot of people get confused: 'Does Hopper really believe that? That's bullshit. But sounds like he believes it.'

[Hopper]: I don't think it comes through. I think Peter comes off as simply a Super Hero, or Super Anti-Hero. Bucky doesn't believe they're going to make it. Bucky says, 'Hey man, they're not going to grow anything here. This is *sand.*'

[Carson]: Right, but you give Captain America the last line: 'They're going to make it.'

[Hopper]: Yeah. Doesn't Captain America always have the last line? 'Go to Vietnam.' I go to Vietnam. I don't question Captain America. I may be bitchy

or carry on, but Captain America always has the last line. That's the way things are.⁶⁸

Decades later, Hopper would expand on his view that the film had been widely misinterpreted:

In *Easy Rider*, one of the main points I tried to get across is that we are a nation of criminals, that we have always admired the criminal. Go back in our history and all you see America doing is making heroes out of people like Billy the Kid, Jesse James, the Daltons, Dillinger, Pretty Boy Floyd, and Bonnie and Clyde. Our country can even admire two guys who smuggle cocaine in from Mexico and ride motorcycles across the U.S. to sell it - and can also admire the two guys who shoot them... I saw those two reactions to the movie. At the end of a showing in Los Angeles, people got up and screamed, 'Kill the pigs.' And in New Orleans, people actually began applauding the guys who shot us. Both reactions bothered me, because I wasn't trying to solicit either one... I wasn't saying they were good guys or bad guys... The statement I was making was the all these people are human beings and look at how fucked up they are. On both sides!⁶⁹

Hopper seems to imply here that the essential position of *Easy Rider* is an inherently incoherent one. Perhaps, then, Roger Ebert was not far from the mark when writing in his 1969 review of the film, "if you follow the story closely in *Easy Rider* you find out it isn't there".⁷⁰ Or, as Chris Hugo put it, "...the film should be described as fashionable, striving always for effect but devoid of any intellectual rigour or political

⁶⁸ Carson, in Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews*, pp. 17-18, emphasis in original.

⁶⁹ Lawrence Linderman, "Gallery Interview: Dennis Hopper", *Gallery* (December 1972), reprinted in Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews*, p. 83.

⁷⁰ Ebert, "Easy Rider".

analysis”.⁷¹ Hugo’s statement aligns with the views of Rick Altman, who sees *Easy Rider*’s overflow of symbolically-loaded iconography as,

excessive... [as] it tends to destabilise the romantic drama reading, offering other interpretive configurations and generic associations. David Bordwell has called Hollywood cinema ‘an excessively obvious cinema’...; in fact, it is precisely because Hollywood cinema provides excess material that it must instead be termed *a deceptively obvious cinema*.⁷²

By 1979, with the benefit of a decade’s historical perspective, James Monaco would confidently declare *Easy Rider* “anomal[y] rather than model... for the entertainment machines of the seventies”.⁷³ Yet it is the kind of anomaly that would spawn waves of imitators, with its most lasting source of influence coming not from the imitation of its contents or style, but rather its means of production, as a low budget, independently produced package picked up for distribution by a major motion picture company and offloaded onto an eager youth audience. *Easy Rider* struck a resounding chord with audiences of its time, and continues to resonate with young audiences of today in a way that many of its imitators have failed to do.⁷⁴ And while Peter Biskind draws a relatively straight line from Harley Davidson to the Millennium Falcon, the lineage that can be traced through *Easy Rider*’s immediate progeny is a crooked one indeed, which the next chapter of this thesis will attempt to straighten out.

⁷¹ Hugo, p. 70.

⁷² Altman, p. 135.

⁷³ Monaco, p. 51.

⁷⁴ One user review on the Internet Movie Database website reads, in part: “I was utterly surprised by this film. I was expecting nothing more than some short scenes of our now-infamous actors smoking marijuana followed by trippy Willy Wonka scenes . Oddly, this did occur, but this film was much more than that. This film should be shown in every American History class in the United States. It not only showed the beauty of the country of which we reside, but it also spoke about the people that reside in it... I would dare say that we have moved so far from the 60s that I cannot see why our parents do not cry everyday”. From film-critic, “This used to be a helluva good country. I can’t understand what’s gone wrong with it”, *IMDb* (25 September 2004). <<http://www.imdb.com/user/ur1601212/comments?order=alpha&start=154>>. (Accessed 23 October 2013).

CHAPTER TWO: VARIATIONS ON A THEME - FIVE EASY

RIDERS

If cooler heads had prevailed in our film industry, the financial and, to a degree, the artistic success of *Easy Rider* would have been regarded as a fortuitous happenstance, perhaps as *The Sound of Music* of the head set. Instead, the boys involved with the making of the picture, notably Dennis Hopper, Peter Fonda, and Jack Nicholson, were at once raised to prophetic status and handed the wherewithal to steer our films of the Seventies on the true and righteous path. All three have now turned in their pictures, and what, then, has been begotten?¹

-Hollis Alpert, 1971

One of the most fundamental urges of the Hollywood machine is to recycle and recombine different elements of its previous productions in the pursuit of profit. In an industry that generates massive expenditure at all stages of production and distribution, and with no promise of safe financial returns, each studio film represents the culmination of a precarious balancing act between the familiar and the new. The familiar can lure established audiences back, but also can quickly bore through repetition. The new can alienate, or fail to attract an audience at all. The nefarious machine grinds on.

An unheralded success of the magnitude of *Easy Rider* can throw out the rhythms of the studio machine, as it points to new, untapped markets. The question then becomes how to repackage a film like *Easy Rider* as something new that still

¹ Hollis Alpert, "The Last Movie", *Saturday Review* (1971), reprinted in David Denby (ed.), *Members of the National Society of Film Critics Write on Film 71-72* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), pp. 153-154.

bears sufficient resemblance to the original film so as to lure its fans back to the cinema. In the years immediately after the release of *Easy Rider*, the major Hollywood motion picture companies set about this task, producing and/or distributing a number of films that incorporated varying combinations of some of *Easy Rider*'s central preoccupations: alienated young men demonstrate their enthusiasm for America's highway system, motorcycles, rock and roll, drugs, the counterculture and violent death, while the films explore the stylistic and narrative tropes lifted from the previous decade of European art-house cinema. A sampling of such films would include *The Strawberry Statement* (dir. Stuart Hagman, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1970), *Little Fauss and Big Halsy, Dealing: Or the Berkeley-to-Boston Forty-Brick Lost Bag Blues* (dir. Paul Williams, Warner Bros., 1972), *Slither* (dir. Howard Zieff, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1973), *The Last American Hero* (dir. Lamont Johnson, Twentieth Century Fox, 1973), *Your Three Minutes Are Up* (dir. Douglas Schwartz, Cinerama, 1973), *Scarecrow* (dir. Jerry Schatzberg, Warner Bros., 1973), *Electra Glide in Blue* (dir. James William Guercio, United Artists, 1973), and *Dirty Mary Crazy Larry* (dir. John Hough, Twentieth Century Fox, 1974). Clearly, this is not a list of titles with enduring legacies to rival that of *Easy Rider*.

This chapter will consider five such films, all of which were released in the wake of *Easy Rider*, and which incorporate elements of that film in strikingly different ways. Raybert Productions' follow-up to *Easy Rider*, *Five Easy Pieces*, represents a significant progression towards the kind of American art house style that Bert Schneider strove to make synonymous with the BBS brand. *Two-Lane Blacktop* explores even stranger existential territory than does *Easy Rider*, displaying the influence of contemporaneous developments of the post-May 1968 last gasp of the French New Wave. *Vanishing Point* distils the elements of *Easy Rider* into a more familiar commercial context, leaving generic conventions intact even as it extracts all

material extraneous to its lean narrative drive. *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* and *Adam at 6 A.M.* are similarly pared-back exercises, both noteworthy for their relationship to stardom and the perils of its subversion, and the enduring power base situated around film distribution. The varied stylistic approaches of these five films, as well as their relative successes and failures shed much light on the inner-workings of the Hollywood studios at the time, and the way in which young American audiences saw themselves (or, in some cases, pointedly did not see themselves) reflected in the silver screen.

PART I: *Five Easy Pieces*

In the year between *Easy Rider* and the company's subsequent release, *Five Easy Pieces*, Raybert Productions would become BBS Productions. Bob Rafelson, who had directed the maiden Raybert outing, *Head* from Jack Nicholson's screenplay, would return to the director's chair. Carole Eastman, one of the more enigmatic figures of the period, wrote the screenplay from Rafelson's scenario.² Prior to *Five Easy Pieces*, Eastman's major cinematic screenwriting credit was for the enigmatic Monte Hellman-directed/Jack Nicholson-starring western *The Shooting* (Walter Reade Organisation, 1966), which became somewhat notorious for its very unavailability. Lauded in France, perhaps unsurprisingly given Hellman's grafting of the expository obscurantism of Alain Resnais to the western genre, the independently produced, Corman-bankrolled *The Shooting* was not picked up for distribution in the United States. The film languished for several years while its legend grew as it became unavailable after its French distributor went broke. It would later be picked up as a

² Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, p. 119.

telemovie by the Walter Reade Organisation, and finally enjoy its first theatrical screenings in the United States in 1972.³

Screenwriter Eastman, a former dancer, model and occasional actor, had further screenwriting credits for additional dialogue on Jacques Demy's Hollywood debut, *Model Shop* (Columbia Pictures, 1969), along with three episodes of the Ben Gazzara terminal-illness drama *Run For Your Life* (NBC) between 1966 and 1968.⁴ In 1970 Eastman would also co-write rock photographer Jerry Schatzberg's directorial debut, the Faye Dunaway-starring psychological thriller *Puzzle of a Downfall Child* (Universal Studios).⁵ On *Five Easy Pieces*, as with *The Shooting*, Eastman would be credited as the gender-ambiguous "Adrien Joyce" (*Puzzle* credits the more distinctly masculine "Adrian Joyce").

Five Easy Pieces was shot mostly in Canada for Columbia in the winter of 1969, with a budget of \$876 000.⁶ Following the huge cultural and box-office impact of *Easy Rider*, it would be Nicholson, not Hopper or Fonda, who would first graduate to an enduringly memorable starring role. Fonda would attempt unsuccessfully to finance a dream project concerning the American Revolution, while Hopper wandered down to Peru for *The Last Movie*, which would prove to be his last directorial outing for a decade.⁷ Nicholson, on the other hand, received wide acclaim for his turn in *Five Easy Pieces*, which would earn him his first Academy Award

³ Susan A. Compo, *Warren Oates: A Wild Life* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), p. 141. In 1971, Michael Goodwin would state of "the mysterious figure of Monte Hellman[,] the reason Hellman is mysterious is that his two great westerns (*The Shooting* and *Ride in the Whirlwind* [dir. Monte Hellman, Walter Reade Organisation, 1965]) have never been released in the United States, and consequently nobody has ever heard of him. If the westerns *had* been released, the Hollywood renaissance might have flowered a few years earlier". See Goodwin, p. 15, emphasis in original.

⁴ Compo, p. 131.

⁵ In another instance of all roads leading back to *Easy Rider*, Schatzberg took the blurry photograph that adorns the cover of Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* album (1966).

⁶ Goodwin, p. 16.

⁷ Elizabeth Campbell, "Rolling Stone Raps with Peter Fonda", *Rolling Stone* (1969), reprinted in Nancy Hardin and Marilyn Schlossberg (eds.). *Easy Rider: Original Screenplay By Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, Terry Southern Plus Stills, Interviews and Articles* (New York: Signet, New American Library, 1969), p.32.

nomination for Best Actor (having previously been nominated for Best Supporting Actor a year earlier for *Easy Rider*).

The film concerns Nicholson's Bobby Dupea, an aimless man working on oil rigs in California, and enduring a seemingly unhappy relationship with waitress Rayette (Karen Black, another *Easy Rider* alumnus). After learning that Rayette has become pregnant, Bobby decides to reunite with his sister Partita, a classically-trained pianist from whom he is estranged. Partita reveals that their father has suffered a series of strokes, and urges Bobby to return to the family home to visit him. After driving to the family's island home in Washington state, Bobby orders Rayette to stay in a motel and avoid his family. Bobby reunites with his immobile, unspeaking father, his brother, Carl, who wears a neck brace after a cycling accident, and Carl's fiancé, Catherine. Bobby and Catherine have an affair, and Rayette arrives by taxi at the family home. After an awkward family dinner with Rayette, culminating in a fistfight between Bobby and his father's nurse, and an emotionally-charged confessional conversation with his mute father, Bobby leaves with Rayette, only to abandon her shortly afterwards at a gas station as he hops in the cabin of a departing logging truck.

Taken as a pair with *Easy Rider*, the two films have many parallels, but are more inversions of one another than duplications. Much as his George Hanson acted as the emotional heart of the otherwise psychologically-remote *Easy Rider*, Jack Nicholson's characterisation of Bobby Dupea is the lynchpin of *Five Easy Pieces*. *Easy Rider* was a film without a clear protagonist, with Wyatt and Billy an at-best oblique buddy pairing, collecting and discard a shifting cast of hangers-on, mumbling dialogue in the absence of any visible displays of emotion. By contrast, Bobby Dupea more comfortably inhabits the role of film protagonist. Unlike Billy and Wyatt, Bobby is a flesh-and-blood, fully-drawn psychological entity struggling to come to terms with his role in the world around him. *Five Easy Pieces* begins from similar

impulses as *Easy Rider*, especially the question what becomes of the alienated individual in America on the cusp of the 1970s. Populated by rootless, wandering characters, both films examine the territory occupied by men who choose to dwell in the liminal space of the open road. Bobby's pained confession to his father at the end of the film, "I move around a lot," could have come straight from Wyatt in *Easy Rider*, but Bobby's subsequent lines, "not because I'm looking for anything really, but 'cause I'm getting away from things that get bad if I stay," indicates the pathos underlying his instinct to flight. *Easy Rider* deliberately sublimated character psychology and motivation in order to suggest allegorical readings, in turn leaving its melange of pop-culture iconography teetering on the edge of incomprehensibility. Where *Easy Rider* removed character exposition in order to create greater resonance of meaning in the mind of the viewer, *Five Easy Pieces* functions differently, introducing its protagonist in one particular context, then later providing new information about his origins in "a diegetic inversion of cause and effect," causing the viewer to reassess the way they have perceived him.⁸ Referring to this mechanism, Jacob Brackman, writing in *Esquire* in 1970, praised the "series of astonishing fake-outs" in which the film effectively pulled the rug out from under the viewer as it scrambled earlier presumptions in the wake of the revelation of new expository information.⁹

In fact, just as Hopper excised the prologue of the *Easy Rider* screenplay in order to erase Billy and Wyatt's back-story, Rafelson elected to remove Carole Eastman's original opening to *Five Easy Pieces*, which began, as scripted, with a montage of the Dupea children playing classical music together, culminating with the 10-year old Bobby attending his mother's funeral, followed by a cut to "the toothed

⁸ Nystrom, *Hard Hats*, p. 40.

⁹ Jacob Brackman, "Review of *Five Easy Pieces*, directed by Bob Rafelson", in David Denby (ed.), *Film 70/71* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), pp. 34, 38. Referred to in Nystrom, *Hard Hats*, p. 40.

bucket of a back hoe”.¹⁰ In a 1976 interview with Rafelson on *Stay Hungry* (dir. Bob Rafelson, United Artists, 1976), Stephen Farber writes that, “Rafelson refuses to provide the explanations for human behaviour that Hollywood writers used to offer, but he has a strong sense of dramatic conflict and surprise. In *Five Easy Pieces* he eliminated a prologue from Carole Eastman’s script which revealed Bobby Dupea’s musical heritage at the outset of the film. Instead he chose to begin Bobby’s story in a more oblique fashion, involving us in Bobby’s perplexing contradictions before disclosing the unconventional background of the hardhat in the oil fields”.¹¹

Beginning by establishing Bobby in a blue-collar context, and then gradually revealing his more aristocratic background, and his self-conscious attempts at obfuscating these class origins, *Five Easy Pieces* becomes, “an eminently political movie that purport[s] not to be about politics at all”.¹² It explores class identity, and the ways in which work can forge the individual. Where Dennis Hopper extracted his protagonists from a capitalist context in order to solidify their status as outsiders, Carole Eastman’s Bobby Dupea is enmeshed in the physicalities of toil. *Five Easy Pieces* spends much of its first 30 minutes documenting Bobby’s life at work on the oil rigs. The first shot of the movie is a low angle shot of a front-end loader dumping its bucket load of debris directly on the camera. In the subsequent pre-credit montage, a number of documentary-style handheld shots observe the processes of labour on the rigs. These shots are accompanied by a continuous, non-synchronised soundtrack of the industrial din, and the images are cut together in an associational, non-narrative manner. Its effect is much the same as the motorcycle montage sequences from *Easy Rider*, viscerally immersing the viewer in the many sights and sounds of the experience represented. The handheld cinematography and the use of a wide angle

¹⁰ Carole Eastman, “*Five Easy Pieces* (1970) movie script”, *Screenplays for You*. <http://sfy.ru/sfy.html?script=five_easy_pieces>. (Accessed 23 October 2013).

¹¹ Stephen Farber, “Stephen Farber From L.A.”, *Film Comment*, Vol. 12, Iss. 3 (May/June 1976), p.3.

¹² Schroeder, p. 123.

lens call to mind the immediacy of Direct Cinema, imbuing Bobby's world of work with the sense of authenticity inherently conveyed in that cinematic mode.¹³ There are three more sequences of this nature in the first thirty minutes of the film, during which Bobby's activities at work, and his interactions at home with Rayette and his colleague Elton (Billy "Green" Bush), are depicted. Bobby works on a flat, wide expanse of blighted land, where towering machinery emerges from the red dirt to dominate the skyline. Away from the oilfields, Bobby sits in front of the television in his home, and occasionally takes in the sights of suburban nightlife, loafing with Rayette and Elton in bowling alleys, bars and diners. In contrast to the quick-cut, mobile camera shots of Bobby's work life, the urban spaces by night in *Five Easy Pieces* are represented in lingering wide shots, in which Bobby is dwarfed within the frame by fluorescent shopfronts, neon lighting, and an abundance of negative space. Stanley Kauffmann, in a 1970 review of the film, praised one particular instance of Rafelson's attention to the nuances of his contemporary setting: "He [Rafelson] has a sense of detail: when Bobby goes into an almost empty coffee shop, a baby in the background is squalling on his parent's lap (standard equipment for small-town coffee shops) and the waitress has a bee-hive hair-do like a 17th-Century Venetian wig".¹⁴ Dennis Bingham sees a fundamental tension between the existential freedom Bobby yearns for, and the impossibility of such escape from this landscape:

A typical Hollywood film might pose the deadening influence of symbolic order – of home, family, and responsibility – against the freedom of escape and wide-open spaces. In the postfrontier, industrial America of *Five Easy Pieces*, however, there is no escape. The fields of the imaginary are now

¹³ This deliberately contrasts with the mannered, static *mise-en-scène* of the sequences shot in Bobby's family home.

¹⁴ Stanley Kauffmann, "Stanley Kauffmann on Films – *Five Easy Pieces*", *New Republic* (26 September 1970), p. 21.

pocked with oil derricks. Trailer parks contain drastically confined versions of home, family, and responsibility.¹⁵

Bobby nevertheless finds temporary transcendence in one famous early scene: Bobby and Elton are stuck in an oppressive traffic jam somewhere on the highway outside of Los Angeles, on their way home from work. Stepping outside of the car, Bobby animatedly displays his displeasure at being boxed-in by the congested traffic; the gridlock has him twice trapped, both within his motor vehicle, and in a fixed location, denying him the open-ended mobility that motor vehicles so traditionally represent in Hollywood cinema. Impulsively, Bobby leaps onto the back of a nearby flatbed truck, and begins playing a piano that sits there. The traffic begins moving, the truck pulls away and carries Bobby away from Elton. Yet even this act of defiance, of spontaneous personal expression, is stifled by the encroaching urbanity, as the car horns drown out his pounding at the piano, and the truck carries him back to the familiar locus of the suburban centre – past the adult theatre, the palmist, and barber college, to the diner where Rayette works.

Within these surroundings, Bobby is never visually depicted as being comfortable or at ease. He often stands trapped within doorways, or sits at the edge of the frame. His body language in his interactions with Rayette and Elton displays a consistent lack of interest in them and their affairs. It is only when Bobby dons his hard hat, work shirt and jeans and takes to work on the oil rig that he assimilates easily into the visual field of the film, becoming interchangeable with his similarly-attired cadre of co-workers, performing the same repetitive physical actions. This visual representation of work takes on particular significance in light of the plot revelations of the second half of the film.

¹⁵ Dennis Bingham, *Acting Male: Masculinities in the Films of James Stewart, Jack Nicholson, and Clint Eastwood* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), p. 112.

Clearly, Bobby is suffering from a similar kind of cultural malaise to that which afflicts Billy and Wyatt in *Easy Rider*. Although Bobby never gives a George Hanson-style address regarding the state of the nation, he is obviously unhappy with the position he occupies in his life. Unlike Billy and Wyatt, Bobby begins the film very clearly fixed in place, bound to this location by the demands of domesticity – a situation that intensifies once he learns of Rayette’s pregnancy. It is easy to imagine that had Billy and Wyatt passed through Bobby’s California town early on their motorcycle journey, and crossed paths with this oil worker, he too could have walked away from his life, to ride pillion with them to Mardi Gras. Along with a sense of generational aimlessness and masculine anguish, hinted at in Wyatt’s sombre scene on the mountaintop at the hippie commune, and the reluctance of his interactions with prostitute Mary (Toni Basil) in New Orleans, Bobby and Billy also share a need to run. This is literalised in both characters taking to the open road, but also figuratively observable within both men’s drive to return to some kind of earlier male physicality - see Billy and Wyatt’s primal bond with the machinery of their motorcycles, and Bobby’s decision to turn to harsh manual labour. *Five Easy Pieces* is a “fantasy of downward mobility,” whereas *Easy Rider* is a fantasy of mobility alone.¹⁶

Hopper’s decision to obscure the reasons behind Billy and Wyatt’s journey turns attention to the journey itself. What they are running from becomes unimportant – the act of running itself takes on heightened significance. For the first thirty minutes of *Five Easy Pieces*, however, the film goes to some lengths to demonstrate Bobby’s dissatisfaction with his domesticated working life. For the savvy viewer watching in 1970, familiar with Nicholson’s earlier turns in *Easy Rider* and Roger Corman’s biker pictures, as well as the associated company style of the BBS brand, it would have been a reasonable assumption that the second act of *Five Easy Pieces* would see

¹⁶ Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, p. 119.

Bobby breaking away from his life with Rayette and taking to the life of a counter-cultural drifter. Such a break does come thirty minutes into the film, with an unexpected cut from the scene of Elton's arrest on the oilfields (all handheld, fast-moving camera), to a slow tracking shot of a classical pianist playing in the mannered, static environment of a recording studio. The abruptness of the cut, and the unexpected geographical shift from the desert to the previously-unseen, sterile recording studio environment throws the viewer off-guard. The incongruous presence of classical music, and its class-specific connotations of refined sophistication, represents a deliberate break from Bobby's milieu as depicted up until this point in the film – the broad, unpretentious appeal of the Tammy Wynette country music that obsesses Rayette, the simplicity of the home she shares with Bobby, the gaudy night establishments at which those two meet with Elton and his wife, the crude folk music that Elton plays in Bobby's car during the traffic jam, and the proletariat affiliations conveyed by that particular genre of music. In fact, Bobby's disgust at Elton's music of choice ("don't you know any songs about women or something?"), punctuated by Bobby's musical one-upmanship, as he exits the car, and begins playing "Fantaisie in F" by Romantic composer Frédéric Chopin, is one of the first clues to Bobby's origins, given that prior to this point in the film, we have had no indication that Bobby is a pianist at all, let alone a failed virtuoso. The other such piece of foreshadowing occurs earlier in the film, when Elton breaks the news of Rayette's pregnancy to Bobby, who responds, enraged, with, "it's ridiculous, I'm sitting here listening to some cracker ass, lives in a trailer park, compare his life to mine." A slightly hurt Elton replies that, "if you're sayin' you're something better'n what I am, that's one thing. But I can't say much a someone who'd run off and leave a woman in a situation like this an' feel easy about it." Bobby's intimation of his superiority to Elton is quickly glossed over, but nonetheless hints at their differences, later

confirmed by Elton's subsequent arrest for robbery - ostensibly in the name of providing for his wife and child, while Bobby, at the end of the film, ultimately fulfils Elton's prophesy, and runs out on the pregnant Rayette.

The arrival of the recording studio sequence – and Bobby's own entrance to this environment, wearing, for the first time onscreen, suit and tie, telling the engineer to inform the performer that "Bobby's here," prompts the viewer to question how exactly Bobby fits into this other world, seemingly so far removed from his own. With the pianist's ecstatic greeting of him, and the first lines of their exchange, it is quickly established that she is Bobby's sister. The question thus becomes not of how Bobby has arrived in this world of classical musicians, but rather how he transitioned to his current life of country music and physical labour. As he commences his journey back to his family's estate on the Puget Sound, the orientation of the film's storyline shifts. Just as *Easy Rider*'s narrative begins at one logical point of conclusion (the successful execution of the drug deal), *Five Easy Pieces* begins with Bobby at the end point of an earlier narrative, the action of which is hinted at throughout the film: namely, Bobby's abandonment of the life of privilege he was born into, and the associated expectations that he fulfil his early promise as a musical prodigy. At some point before the plot picked up at the outset of *Five Easy Pieces*, Bobby made the decision to break with this lifestyle, obliterating it amidst physical work and blue-collar affectations. After the first thirty minutes of the film establishes that Bobby finds this life as untenable as his earlier incarnation, he is given little recourse but to follow in the footsteps of Billy and Wyatt, and take to the road. However, where their motorcycle journey ventured into narrative uncertainty, underscored by a rejection of social and causal convention (Wyatt's casting away of his wristwatch, Billy and Wyatt's refusal to participate in commune life, and the screenplay's essential incoherence), Bobby's cross-country sojourn north is, to borrow the parlance of Neil

Young, a journey through the past, the prodigal son revisiting the life he once rejected, and will reject again. As Billy and Wyatt spend the duration of *Easy Rider* in a state of narrative and geographical stasis, most comfortably inhabiting liminal spaces astride motorcycles, between arbitrary destinations, *Five Easy Pieces* is even more fundamentally a narrative uncomfortably occupying the cinematic no-man's land between ending and beginning – opening with Bobby at the logical end point of a goal-based narrative (rejecting his family history, embracing blue-collar employment and heterosexual romance with Rayette), fluctuating for its duration between Bobby's inability to assimilate comfortably within either his chosen new life, or his tentative revisitation of his ancestral home, and concluding with his abandonment of both – a situation that represents either the beginning of a new narrative, an *Easy Rider*-style journey of the alienated young man traversing America's unknown road; or, more sinisterly, hinting at that movie's fatalistic conclusion, the implication being that his “northern journey, without the coat he has given away, will culminate in death”.¹⁷ In his 1970 review of the film, Roger Ebert succinctly captures the feelings that resonate through its final moments:

This is possibly the moment when his [Bobby's] nerve fails and he condemns himself, consciously, to a life of self-defined failure. The movie ends, after several more scenes, on a note of ambiguity; he is either freeing himself from the waitress or, on the other hand, he is setting off on a journey even deeper into anonymity. It's impossible to say, and it doesn't matter much. What matters is the character during the time covered by the film: a time when Dupea tentatively reapproaches his past and then rejects it, not out of pride, but out of fear.¹⁸

¹⁷ Thomas L. Erskine, “*Five Easy Pieces*”, *Film Reference*. <<http://www.filmreference.com/Films-Ey-Fo/Five-Easy-Pieces.html>>. (Accessed 23 October 2013).

¹⁸ Roger Ebert, “*Five Easy Pieces*”, *Chicago Sun-Times* (1970). <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/five-easy-pieces-1970>>. (Accessed 23 October 2013).

The film offers no note of finality at its conclusion. The audience leaves the cinema with a muted sense of disappointment with the refusal to provide a sense of narrative closure, as the final wide shot of the gas station (so wide that Bobby and Rayette are reduced to anonymous figures on the big screen) plays out unendingly beneath the credits, as the logging truck bears Bobby away over the horizon to new stories unknown, and more cars pull into the gas station, bringing with them a potential multiplicity of new narrative starting-points. By regarding Bobby from such a distance, his facial expression is inscrutable, rendering his “inner life as opaque to us as it [is] to him”.¹⁹

Five Easy Pieces was received very positively by critics. Pauline Kael, in a particularly breathless review, called it, “a striking movie... eloquent, important, written and improvised in a clear-hearted American idiom”.²⁰ Nicholson, in his first starring role post-*Easy Rider*, was singled out for near-universal acclaim. Interestingly, despite the fact that he was approaching his mid-thirties at the time he played Bobby Dupea, *Five Easy Pieces*' theme of generational struggle prompted many critics to interpret the film as a youth-cult, counterculture-vs.-The Establishment picture, and place it alongside *Easy Rider* (which itself starred the 33-year-old Hopper, and the 29-year-old Fonda: hardly poster-children for youth, although as a creative team they did represent something of a generational change). In 1970, Stefan Kanfer in *Time* could refer to both *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces* as representing “the new ‘road’ pictures”.²¹ Stanley Kauffmann, writing in the *New Republic*, would go even further, linking *Five Easy Pieces* with the gulf between generational values, and the reluctance of the young to accept to mantle of their

¹⁹ Barry Langford, *Post-Classical Hollywood: Film Industry, Style and Ideology Since 1945*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 144.

²⁰ Pauline Kael, cited in Michael Dare, “*Five Easy Pieces*”, The Criterion Collection. <<http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/884-five-easy-pieces>>. (Accessed 15 February 2011).

²¹ Stefan Kanfer, “Supergypsy”, *Time* (14 September 1970), p. 89.

forebears. Kauffmann's review of Rafelson's film begins with a lengthy personal vignette that is worth repeating in full here:

Two months ago I was driving down through the Grand Tetons and gave a lift to a young man. He turned out to be a Ph.D candidate from an eastern university who had just finished his coursework and couldn't get up enough interest to write his dissertation. The whole process had turned futile on him. He had come out to Wyoming to get a job with his hands; he didn't know how long it would be before he went back. Perhaps never.

I thought of him when I saw *Five Easy Pieces*.²²

Clearly, despite the fact that both Nicholson and his Bobby Dupea character are approaching middle age, Kauffmann can see his own encounter with this "young man's" crisis of ambition reflected in Bobby's turn from his prodigious gifts as a pianist. Derek Nystrom pinpoints the critical tendency to read extratextual generational resonance into *Five Easy Pieces* that does not necessarily reside within the film itself, writing that, "the context of the film's release – coming, as it did, during the main deluge of youth-cult films – made some of the connections between the conflicts played out by the film and those identified with generational disputes a bit more pronounced".²³ Dennis Bingham falls into this very trap when confidently declaring that *Five Easy Pieces*, "was popular because it seemed to depict a generation's disaffection with the values of its parents".²⁴ On the one hand, it is true that the conflict between father and son are central to *Five Easy Pieces*' eventual storyline. On the other hand, the film goes to great lengths to conceal this narrative arc from its audience for the better part of its first half, as its focus moves from documentation of suburban working-class alienation to the liminal spaces of the open road (diners, motels, the interior and exterior of Bobby's car), before finally settling

²² Kauffmann, p. 21.

²³ Nystrom, *Hard Hats*, p. 39.

²⁴ Bingham, p. 114.

into the creaky, rain-soaked Dupea manor at the fifty minute mark. At this point, *Five Easy Pieces* becomes a chamber drama, in which characters walk stiffly in neck-braces, sit impassively in wheelchairs, glower at one another over family dinners, and play scales on the piano for hours on end. This is the site of Bobby's rebellion, the spectre of his past from which he runs. Unlike *Easy Rider*, which, despite Peter Fonda's visibly receding hairline, managed to sufficiently capture a youthful sense of breaking away from mainstream society into the margins, *Five Easy Pieces* sees Bobby's dissatisfaction with his privileged station amongst the cultural elite simmering well into his passage into middle age.

Nor does *Five Easy Pieces* draw on the pop cultural lexicon of its time in such a wilfully ambiguous manner as *Easy Rider*. The burgeoning counterculture, which intersected so regularly with Billy and Wyatt's motorcycle journey, rears its head only once in *Five Easy Pieces*, in the form of the two hitchhikers (played Toni Basil and Helena Kallianiotes, both *Easy Rider* alumni) whom Bobby picks up on his way to his family estate. Consistent with the general strain of misogyny that runs through *Five Easy Pieces*, these women are not represented as fully-fleshed, psychological entities of the order of Bobby, but as one-dimensional caricatures that are to be mocked. Basil's Terry vaguely states that she is travelling to Alaska, "because it's cleaner" prompting Bobby to wordlessly leave these hitchhikers at the roadside.²⁵

Unlike Billy and Wyatt, who freely associate with the inhabitants of the hippy

²⁵ In its sexism, *Five Easy Pieces* treads the same ground as *Easy Rider* before it, in which the only female characters with whom the male protagonists interact occupy passive roles as potential romantic partners for Billy and Wyatt, romantic partners of other male characters, or prostitutes, and denied psychological realism as rounded characters or causal agents within the narrative. *Five Easy Pieces* is similarly cruel in its portrayal of Rayette, who is at best regarded as a nuisance for Bobby. In this regard, Bingham finds the film problematic, as it offers an "inadvertent affirmation... of the patriarchal identifications at which the film lashes out." Nystrom follows these lines of reasoning, seeing the representation of Rayette's "apparently class-specific tackiness and ignorance," as symptomatic of *Five Easy Pieces*' broader lapses in authenticity.

Jonathan Kirshner views the situation slightly differently, stating that through the "dominant role" that Catherine plays in their affair, Bobby becomes "uncharacteristically feminized"; Kirshner views this power relationship as symptomatic of the ways in which, rather than being sexist, the film is in fact, "very alert to and sophisticated in its handling of gender issues." See Bingham, p. 116; Nystrom, *Hard Hats*, p. 41 and Kirshner, *Hollywood's Last Golden Age*, p. 66.

commune, Bobby's overt rejection of the hitchhikers, coupled with his general adoption of hard-hat manual labour and the associated lifestyle, suggests that his political worldview is probably more closely aligned to that of Peter Boyle's *Joe* (dir. John G. Avildsen, Cannon Films, 1970) than the *Easy Riders*. As Derek Nystrom indicates, *Five Easy Pieces* "eschews any explicit association of its protagonist with an identifiable counterculture".²⁶ In fact, unable to authentically inhabit the role he was born into among the cultural elite, Bobby turns to the decidedly *counter-*countercultural domain of blue-collar work. When he is unable to subsume his angst in that role, he returns tentatively once more to his roots, before setting himself adrift. More than a perpetual loner, Bobby Dupea is something of a failed chameleon. This is visible in the clothing he adopts (flannel shirt and jeans for the oil fields, skivvy, sweater, collared shirt and slacks once he returns to his family home), his patterns of speech (broad, inflected with a put-on Southern drawl at the oilfields, and more self-consciously mannered and refined at the family home), and in his half-hearted attempts to reconcile with his estranged family. Ultimately, though, Bobby chooses the same fate as Billy and Wyatt, rejecting his position within society, in favour of a solitary life of aimlessness, casting himself into "a prepolitical space where individual rebellion, not solidarity or communal commitment, appear[s] to be his only way out of the bourgeois family".²⁷

Taken as two elucidations on a shared theme, and coming from the same production company within a year of one another, *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces* could represent the basis of a new Hollywood cycle: less Kanfer's "new road picture," than downbeat portraits of male alienation. This, in itself, was not a particularly new phenomenon within Hollywood, with similar themes being a staple of the early melodramas of Montgomery Clift and James Dean, as well as many films

²⁶ Nystrom, *Hard Hats*, p. 38.

²⁷ Schroeder, p. 123.

noirs. Stanley Kauffmann stated that the film had to do with “US 1970” than “the ‘congenital’ spiritual torment of a born Outsider”.²⁸ In fact, many critics, even as they were drawing similarities with *Easy Rider*, posited that Rafelson’s film seemed notably out of its time: *Variety* called *Five Easy Pieces* “reminiscent of nothing so much as the French films of the 1940s and 1950s”.²⁹ Dennis Bingham would later draw parallels with Beat writings and the British “angry young men” pictures of the late-1950s.³⁰ Mitchell Cohen called *Five Easy Pieces* “bleaker moments... distinctly Bergmanesque,” while cinematographer László Kovács revealed that the film’s influences went back even further, stating that, “Bob Rafelson and I saw the film as a kind of Chekhovian play”.³¹ Clearly, the sum of these influences is something older, more theatrical, and more distinctly European, than the self-consciously contemporary Americana of *Easy Rider*.

Even the narrative arc of *Five Easy Pieces* represents a retreat from contemporary affairs: Bobby retires north from the suburban strip-malls of California to the enclosed isolation of the cavernous family home in the secluded Puget Sound, a house that entombs living generations of Dupea family (and walls of photographs of their forebears), each playing the same Chopin movements that have rung throughout the halls for the last century. The ending of the film finds Bobby heading further north for unknown territories, presumably the barren tundras of Canada or Alaska. The lingering final frame of the film is dominated by the enormous gas station sign which, in a Godardian twist, employs a corporate logo to comment ironically on the

²⁸ Kauffmann, p. 21.

²⁹ Anon (Variety Staff), “Review: ‘*Five Easy Pieces*’”, *Variety* (1969). <<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117790943?refcatid=31>>. (Accessed 29 July 2014).

³⁰ Bingham, p. 111.

³¹ Mitchell Cohen, “‘*Head*’ to ‘*Gardens*’ via ‘*Easy Rider*’ The Corporate Style of BBS”, *Take One*, Vol. 3, No. 12 (July-August 1972, pub. 27 November 1973), p. 22., and Goodwin, p. 16. In the same interview, Kovács expands upon his attempts with Rafelson to create a theatrical (rather than cinematic) aesthetic for the film: “We decided that we would never move the camera when we were in exteriors, just work with cuts and composition. It’s all set shots”. See Goodwin, p. 16.

irreconcilable impasse at which Bobby and Rayette now find themselves, as Bobby attempts to put geographical distance between them: *Gulf*.

This is a fundamental point of difference from *Easy Rider*. Youths were drawn to *Easy Rider* in part by the promise that transgressive social activities would be on display: dope smoking and free loving would be liberated from the illegitimate confines of the exploitation cinema into the lavish theatrical release courtesy of legitimate motion picture distributor Columbia Pictures, all set to the soundtrack of popular rock artists. *Easy Rider* took a kaleidoscopic eye to the sights and sounds of its day, in a way that set it apart from previous Hollywood pictures. “The young kind of movies being made for kids were *Beach Blanket Bingo* [dir. William Asher, American International Pictures, 1965] with Frankie Avalon, and they had very little to do with the reality,” said Hopper of the Hollywood output in the years leading up to *Easy Rider*.³² Hopper saw the American motion picture languishing behind other artforms when it came to representing contemporary youth experience, and approached *Easy Rider* as a self-conscious attempt to rectify that. “So much was happening at that moment... basically, this was tapping into the end of it. Pop art had already happened, rock and roll had already happened. The summer of love was over”.³³ Where some critics took issue with its lack of character development, this transparency in fact allowed Billy and Wyatt to become audience surrogates, allowing the eager young viewer to experience all of the dangerous pleasures of the dropout life from the safety of the suburban cinema. *Five Easy Pieces*, on the other hand, is *all* psychology. By restricting the focus of the film to Bobby’s individual experience, and moving away from representations of a broader cultural context, Bobby’s torments are projected inwards – a less overtly cinematic approach than that of *Easy Rider*’s

³² Dennis Hopper, *Shaking the Cage* documentary.

³³ *Ibid.*

motorcycle montage sequences, but a more actorly/literary/theatrical approach to psychological characterisation.

A key difference here is that *Easy Rider* is an ambivalent film because Billy and Wyatt are psychologically undeveloped characters. On the other hand, *Five Easy Pieces* is an ambivalent film for precisely the opposite reason: Bobby is explored in intimate detail, with the film refusing to shy away from the ugliest aspects of his personality. Bobby's actions throughout the film cast him in a consistently unsympathetic light, given as he is to rudeness, manipulation, sexual infidelity, and a tendency to run out on the responsibilities he accumulates. Rafelson's typically detached cinematic mode observes Bobby's behaviour without incorporating moralising stylistic artifice, which means Nicholson's performance is foregrounded. As played by Nicholson, Bobby becomes an icon of impotent masculinity, reacting at every turn against perceived forces of authority in the guise of professional employers, family patriarchs, and the many women Bobby perceives are attempting to corral him. Bobby's treatment of Rayette (retreating to his car to explode in a rage when he learns she wishes to accompany him to Washington, and later stowing her away in a motel when he considers her unworthy of meeting his family), and the famous scene in which he castigates a female waitress for her inability to serve him a chicken sandwich, render him as a vaguely pathetic, powerless figure inhabiting an environment in which he has no choice but to self-destruct. It is a credit to Nicholson's inherent charisma as an actor that the character is not completely detestable, enabling the movie to be more than just a study of a monstrous loser, and evoking moments of genuine pathos in response to the tearful monologue Bobby delivers to his father at the film's end. In a 2003 retrospective evaluation of the film, Roger Ebert wrote that,

It is difficult to explain today how much Bobby Dupea meant to the film's first audiences... He's a voluntary outcast who can't return to his early life, yet has no plausible way to move forward. He's stranded between occupations, personas, ambitions, social classes. In 1970 (and before and since), most American movies centered on heroes who defined the plot, occupied it, made it happen. *Five Easy Pieces* is about a character who doesn't fit in the movie. There's not a scene where he's comfortable with the people around him, not a moment when he feels at home.³⁴

Like *Easy Rider*, *Five Easy Pieces* occupies a space outside traditional, problem-resolution narrative. But where Hopper, Fonda and Southern offered opaque sketches of characterisation, Rafelson and Eastman take a different route, equally challenging, by casting the charismatic Nicholson as the unlikeable Bobby Dupea, and spending the duration of the film exploring his psyche whilst steadfastly refusing to offer a moral judgement on his actions. Unlike the *Easy Riders*, whose onscreen demise came as a sacrificial gesture at the hands of USA1969, Rafelson denies Bobby the martyrdom of an onscreen death, which may have validated, or at least rendered in a tragic light, his selfish behaviour. *Five Easy Pieces* ends with its narrative arc reset, Bobby resuming his passage "from nowhere to nowhere".³⁵ Yet the fundamentally unsympathetic nature of Bobby's character still begs the question of exactly how Rafelson and BBS expected to lure the audience of *Easy Rider* back to the cinemas for *Five Easy Pieces*, if indeed the film was intended to share the same audience.

The cinematic style of *Five Easy Pieces*, shot, as was *Easy Rider*, by cinematographer László Kovács, is more firmly rooted in a Classical Hollywood tradition than the earlier film. While *Five Easy Pieces* shares with its predecessor

³⁴ Roger Ebert, "Great Movie: *Five Easy Pieces*", www.rogerebert.com (16 March, 2003). <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19700101/REVIEWS/1010309/1023>>. (Accessed 23 October 2013).

³⁵ Dare.

stretches of lyrical outdoor cinematography, particularly of Bobby at work on the oil rigs and on the road between California and Washington, it generally eschews the wide framings of *Easy Rider* in favour of more conventional medium/close shot-reverse-shots, just as it brings its protagonist closer to comprehension in psychological terms. Nystrom singles out the expressive sequences of Bobby at work as indicative of the inauthenticity at the heart of *Five Easy Pieces*, as the disjunction between Bobby's cultured origins and his insincere appropriation of manual labour reflects the film's adoption of self-consciously aestheticised "visual flourishes... [which] foreground the act of filmmaking itself... [illuminating] the implicit contradiction between the film's formal embrace and thematic rejection of highbrow aesthetics".³⁶ Elsewhere, Rafelson avoids the bravura smash-cut editing and montage of Hopper's film. If the two films were assessed side-by-side, their only major source of stylistic common ground is their occasional recourse to a documentary-style, handheld aesthetic that lends an air of authenticity to the both films. However, this device is used seldom enough in either film to ever dominate or define the aesthetic approaches of their respective directors. In fact, *Five Easy Pieces*' contribution to a post-Classical style comes less from its cinematographic form than from its withholding of narrative exposition. In his 1970 *Life* magazine review of *Five Easy Pieces*, Richard Schickel marvelled that within the narrative of this particular film, "there is no crisis. It occurred before the movie began. There is only a series of incidents – moments of anger, comedy, nostalgia, passing sadness – that reveal the central character... to be neither what we thought he was in the beginning nor

³⁶ Nystrom, *Hard Hats*, p. 45. Following similar lines of thought, the review of *Five Easy Pieces* in *Playboy* criticised its "lapses into self-conscious cinematography" while praising "freshman director and co-author Bob Rafelson... [as] a perceptive, compassionate observer of characters from two very distinct social milieus"; *Playboy*'s highest praise was reserved for Nicholson, whose performance is described as "variegated, humorous, colourful and deeply felt". See Anon, "Movies: *Five Easy Pieces*", *Playboy* (November 1970), p. 38.

anything like an archetype”.³⁷ Such casual ellipses of narrative would be hallmarks of such later New Hollywood films as *The Conversation* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, Paramount Pictures, 1974), with the deliberate withholding of plot information owing more to European directors like Resnais and Antonioni than anything that had thus appeared in the Hollywood cinema. Schickel’s “series of incidents” points to another important difference between the storytelling styles of *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces*: where the former film unfolded around a rollicking picaresque structure, the “moments” of *Five Easy Pieces* are more muted, restrained, and quotidian in nature, predominantly observing everyday moments within domestic, professional, and familial settings. In comparing the “central emblem” of “the road as panacea” in both films, Stefan Kanfer writes that in *Five Easy Pieces*, “if something in the plot has thickened, something in the pulse has slowed”.³⁸ Mitchell Cohen elaborates further on the differing narrative modes of the two films:

Easy Rider... perhaps due to its extravagant shooting ratio, had a feeling of randomness in its scene selection, a sense that on the way to Mardi Gras there were a number of other moments that would have been equally illuminating. This notion persists throughout *Pieces*. Although we are quite deliberately placed at a dramatic turning point in the life of Bobby, Rafelson deliberately leaves ellipses in the narrative propulsion, so that scenes end abruptly and character situations... are left unresolved. The journey film is by nature linearly episodic, but *Rider* and *Pieces* have taken this filmic tradition and infused a measure of inconclusiveness that places the chosen people and events on the axis of a larger continuum. *Easy Rider* is allowed to end in a

³⁷ Richard Schickel, “A Man’s Journey Into His Past”, *Life* (18 September 1970), p. 16.

³⁸ Kanfer, p. 89.

conventional climactic manner, however, while its successor just leaves

Bobby shivering in the front seat of a truck, on the road once more.³⁹

Ultimately, the similarities shared by *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces* (alienated masculinity, contemporary settings, lyrical visions of the road, downbeat endings, and circumstances of independent production paired with major studio distribution) fail to bridge the essential points of difference between the two films. Where the emergence of the BBS brand may have pointed to the beginnings of a distinct film cycle, *Five Easy Pieces* in many ways failed to capitalise on the promise of the earlier film. While *Easy Rider* was met with mixed-to-negative reviews, the widespread critical acclaim that greeted *Five Easy Pieces* was accompanied by only modest box-office success. *Five Easy Pieces* was the thirteenth highest grossing release of 1970, while *Easy Rider* had achieved the fourth highest grossing position of the previous year. *Easy Rider*, in its high and lowbrow melding of art cinema trappings and exploitation cinema, easily found its youth audience. *Five Easy Pieces*, a chamber drama at heart, painted with the *Easy Rider* brush only by virtue of association, would not fare so easily, perhaps being too sparse, too contemplative, and too evasive in terms of its subject matter to galvanise the audience who embraced the *Easy Rider* cocktail of drugs and rock'n'roll, with sex on the side. Hopper made a film about America, whereas Rafelson made a film about himself. The irony is that Rafelson found his most sympathetic audience amidst the approving circles of the upper-middle class critical establishment - the very kinds of people that are the source of Bobby Dupea's angst, as well as the most outspoken critics of Hopper's earlier film. Having been unable to successfully marry critical and box-office success, BBS would spend the following years learning lessons of failure, and attempting to walk the tightrope between artistic credibility and commercial viability in the 1970s Hollywood

³⁹ Cohen, p. 21.

landscape. If *Five Easy Pieces* is the moment at which Schneider, Rafelson and co outgrew the exploitation origins of *Easy Rider*, the question would persist as to whether the company could forge its own identity as a financially sustainable brand deserving of serious critical attention. BBS' critical watershed of the following year, Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show*, would largely answer that question, even as it set BBS on a path that would see the company's fortunes diminish to nothing by decades end. In the meantime, the influence of *Easy Rider* would expand far beyond the reaches of the BBS stable, manifesting over the following year in a diverse variety of forms.

PART II: *Two-Lane Blacktop*

The white lines of a freeway, spotlighted by headlight lamps, flash past into darkness. Warren Oates, white-knuckled with a nervous grin plastered across his face, yells, barely audible over the din of the roaring engine, “What are you trying to do, blow my mind?” A caption scrolls past on the screen: “Their lives begin at 140 m.p.h.” Youngsters in search of more high-octane kicks in the wake of *Easy Rider* would have found the promise of much excitement in this trailer for Monte Hellman’s *Two-Lane Blacktop*: rapidly-cut shots of fast cars race across the screen, while the presence of singer-songwriter James Taylor and Beach Boy Dennis Wilson surely indicate another fashionably contemporary rock-and-roll soundtrack. The trailer highlights the cross-country race between the James Taylor and Warren Oates characters, and their simultaneous war for the affections of the young drifter played by Laurie Bird. The mood of the trailer is one of urgency, foregrounding the high stakes race in which the loser forfeits ownership of their vehicle to the victor. The trailer simultaneously hints at the dangerous underground network of the street-racing fraternity; the lurid attention paid to this illegal activity in the *Two-Lane Blacktop* trailer aligns the film with the AIP exploitation-film stock from which *Easy Rider* emerged, as opposed to BBS’ Americana-inflected appropriation of a Bergman-esque European style chamber drama with *Five Easy Pieces*. *Two-Lane Blacktop* promises an exploration of a menacing subculture on the fringes of society, seen meeting clandestinely at late night roadsides in pursuit of the singular goal of driving very, very fast. The trailer concludes with an exciting promise of entry into “the far out world of the high speed scene!”

Two-Lane Blacktop was written by former western TV actor and one-time writer for *Gunsmoke* (CBS, 1965), Will Corry, and acquired as a property by agent Mike Medavoy. According to Medavoy, Terrence Malick, who was working, pre-

Badlands (dir. Terrence Malick, Warner Bros., 1973), as a Hollywood script doctor at the time, rewrote it.⁴⁰ Medavoy offered Corry's script to his client, director Monte Hellman, along with Floyd Mutrux's *The Christian Licorice Store*. Hellman turned down Mutrux's screenplay, which would eventually surface under the direction of James Frawley (National General Pictures, 1971). Hellman had been working for the preceding decade in television and theatre, and was on the fringes of the Roger Corman stable that had reared *Easy Rider*: as well as editing a number of Corman efforts, (notably the Fonda-starring, Nicholson-penned pre- *Easy Rider* biker exploitation picture *The Wild Angels*), Hellman directed Jack Nicholson in two westerns for Corman: *Ride in the Whirlwind* and *The Shooting*. The two westerns were filmed concurrently, but were screened on the international festival circuit in 1965 and 1966 respectively. A self-consciously stilted, almost impenetrably cryptic film shot against a stark Utah backdrop, *The Shooting* is distinguished by memorable appearances from the reliably hangdog Warren Oates, and a menacingly villainous young Jack Nicholson, who allows a streak of impulsive violence to underscore his performance, without elevating it to the stylised mania that would become a hallmark of his later performances (as in *The Shining* [dir. Stanley Kubrick, Warner Bros., 1980] and *The Departed* [dir. Martin Scorsese, Warner Bros., 2006]). The strange mood of existential dread that pervades *The Shooting* is more Samuel Beckett than Henry Hathaway, and Hellman and Eastman's deliberate avoidance of generic tropes takes on an absurdist bent on the way to its puzzling conclusion.

In search of his next project while both *The Shooting* and *Ride in the Whirlwind* lacked a distributor in the United States, something in the screenplay of *Two-Lane Blacktop* sufficiently appealed to Hellman to persuade him to accept the project. Hellman would later say of his decision, "I liked the IDEA of *Two-Lane*

⁴⁰ Mike Medavoy (with Josh Young), *You're Only As Good As Your Next One: 100 Great Films, 100 Good Films, and 100 for Which I Should Be Shot* (New York: Arista Books, 2002), p. 5.

Blacktop, so I lied, and told [Medavoy] that I thought it was a great script, and then after I was hired I said that, ‘I think we need a lot of work on this script.’”⁴¹ Hellman would elsewhere label Corry’s script, “the most insipid, silly sentimental, dumb movie you could imagine. But it was about a race. I was attracted to just the idea of a cross-country race”.⁴² Hellman enlisted novelist Rudy Wurlitzer, whose only screen credit at the time was the dark, X-rated post-apocalyptic/counterculture meld *Glen and Randa* (dir. and co-written Jim McBride, Universal Marion Corporation, 1971), to rewrite *Two-Lane Blacktop*.⁴³ Wurlitzer had even stronger reservations about the material. Hellman recalls Wurlitzer, “read five pages, and said, ‘I can’t read this,’ and I said, ‘well, you don’t have to. The basic idea is a cross-country race between two cars,’ and so he wrote a completely new script that had pretty much no relationship to the original other than the driver, and the... mechanic”.⁴⁴

To describe the plot of *Two-Lane Blacktop* as filmed from Wurlitzer’s screenplay is to risk being doubly misleading, as the events chronicled within its duration are so slight, and presented in such a deadpan manner, that putting them in writing risks attributing narrative significance to events that pass by without dramatic emphasis. Nevertheless, the film follows two young male car enthusiasts, referred to only as the driver (James Taylor) and the mechanic (Dennis Wilson), as they drift through California’s highway system in a heavily customised 1955 Chevy, occasionally taking part in street races. A young woman, referred to as the girl

⁴¹ Monte Hellman interview, *You Can Never Go Fast Enough - Two Lane Blacktop Revisited*, *Two-Lane Blacktop* DVD, Umbrella Entertainment, 2007.

⁴² Kent Jones, “The Cylinders Were Whispering My Name: The Films of Monte Hellman”, in Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King (eds.), *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), p. 179.

⁴³ McBride had already made the premonitory mockumentary diary film *David Holzman’s Diary* (1967) in New York’s 16mm underground. L.M. Kit Carson starred; he would later make a documentary on Dennis Hopper’s editing of *The Last Movie*, *The American Dreamer* (dir. with Lawrence Schiller, EYR Films, 1971), and write both the oddball *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* (dir. Tobe Hooper, Cannon Films Inc., 1986), in which Hopper would star, and *Paris, Texas* (dir. Wim Wenders, Twentieth Century Fox, 1984), which would star *Two-Lane Blacktop* bit-player Harry Dean Stanton. *Two-Lane Blacktop* writer Wurlitzer would later write Sam Peckinpah’s elegiac, death-obsessed *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1973).

⁴⁴ Monte Hellman, audio commentary, *Two-Lane Blacktop* DVD, Umbrella Entertainment, 2007.

(Laurie Bird), climbs into the back of the car one day while it is parked at a diner. Anonymously, wordlessly, she comes along for the ride. After a number encounters on the road with a stock 1970 Pontiac GTO, the driver and the mechanic find themselves sharing a petrol bowser with the driver of that car, played by Warren Oates, and referred to as GTO. A challenge is issued: the two vehicles will race to Washington, D.C. The prize: the pink slips, the document that confers ownership of the losing vehicle. What follows is a brief series of sketches and interludes: run-ins with the police, illegal street-races, picking up hitch-hikers, dealing with mechanical failures. These incidents pass by in such an understated manner that any notion of an unfolding narrative barely registers. As the film reaches its conclusion, the girl switches her allegiance from Taylor and Wilson to Oates' GTO. The driver decides to abandon the race, turning back from his leading position to intercept GTO and the girl. All four characters converge on a diner close to their destination of Washington, D.C. The girl abandons both the driver and GTO in favour of an anonymous motorcyclist who happens to be in the diner at the time. At this point, the driver, mechanic and GTO apparently abandon their race entirely. The film concludes with an epilogue showing that life continues for its characters exactly as it found them at its opening: GTO continues to pick up hitchhikers and regale them with excerpts from his life story; the driver takes the '55 Chevy through another street race. In this concluding scene the film itself slows, stops, and incinerates before the audience's eyes.

The path through pre-production on *Two-Lane Blacktop* was not an easy one. Hellman began developing the project with producer Michael Laughlin at Cinema Center Films, the short-lived (1967-72) film production branch of the CBS television network. The auditioning process was arduous, with Hellman and casting director

Fred Roos testing hundreds of actors and non-actors in Los Angeles and New York.⁴⁵ James Taylor was cast after Hellman saw a billboard advertising his breakthrough second album, *Sweet Baby James* (1970) while driving in Los Angeles. Roos suggested Beach Boy Dennis Wilson. Laurie Bird originally came to the attention of the crew as a bohemian hanger-on who gravitated towards the casting sessions in New York. Hellman, impressed by her charisma, envisioned her as a prototype for the character of the girl, and recorded a four-hour interview with her that he referred back to as a character template when casting for the role in Los Angeles. It was only after these additional Los Angeles casting sessions failed to find a suitable performer for the role that the idea occurred to Hellman to cast Bird in the role.⁴⁶ Of the four leads, the seasoned Warren Oates was the only one with an onscreen credit to his name, although in Hellman's estimation, it was Wilson who was "the most famous person who wound up in the movie".⁴⁷ Screen tests were necessary "to satisfy a lot of studio executives" that Taylor and Bird would be able to carry their roles.⁴⁸ Oates came to *Two-Lane Blacktop* after having been turned down for Vernon Zimmerman's filming of Terrence Malick's early screenplay, the trucker comedy *Deadhead Miles* (dir. Vernon Zimmerman, Paramount Pictures, 1973). Oates was only cast by Hellman after Bruce Dern confirmed his unavailability for the role.⁴⁹

At this stage, with the major roles cast, an executive at Cinema Center Films read the script for the first time, and found little to have faith in, deciding to pass on the project. This left Hellman little recourse but to take "the picture literally to every studio in town," including Columbia, BBS, John Calley at Warner Bros., and Metro-

⁴⁵ Hellman, audio commentary. Roos would later produce the first two *Godfather* films and *Apocalypse Now* for Francis Ford Coppola.

⁴⁶ Hellman, *You Can Never Go Fast Enough*.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Compo, p. 204.

Goldwyn-Mayer.⁵⁰ None of the production executives at any of these studios believed that Hellman would be able to complete the film for the \$1.1 million budget he proposed. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer had further reservations that Hellman “could maintain interest in a picture that was shot entirely within a car”.⁵¹ Finally, executive Ned Tannen at Universal agreed to finance the film on the condition that it come in for under \$900 000. The film would ultimately come in under budget at \$850 000.⁵²

The new modes of production established by *Easy Rider* were necessarily adopted by the low budget *Two-Lane Blacktop*. The most obvious shared similarity between the two films, pointing towards an emerging trend across all Hollywood genres at the time, was the emphasis on location shooting. Unlike *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces*, which predominantly utilised real locations, accompanied by a handful of constructed sets and augmented real-world locations, *Two-Lane Blacktop* was filmed completely on location, using existing settings. More dramatically, Hellman decided to shoot the movie in sequence, meaning that the entire film crew undertook the same cross-country journey depicted in the film. This presented a number of logistical hurdles: Universal wanted the film to be shot in rural California, which the studio felt offered sufficient degree of geographical variation, but Hellman and executive producer Kurtz refused; budgetary and practical restraints therefore necessitated a small crew of eighteen in half a dozen vehicles.⁵³ The decision to shoot in this way resulted in some specific artistic and aesthetic outcomes. For example, the relatively small size of the crew allowed a degree of practical freedom, permitting Hellman to follow inspiration where and when it struck. On the commentary accompanying the Umbrella Australian DVD release, Kurtz recalls that a roadside stockyard was included in the film simply “because we drove by, and said, ‘that looks

⁵⁰ Hellman, audio commentary.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Hellman, audio commentary.

⁵³ Gary Kurtz, audio commentary, *Two-Lane Blacktop* DVD, Umbrella Entertainment, 2007.

great, we use it.””⁵⁴ As so much of the movie is set within moving cars, many such scenes were shot while in transit between locations.⁵⁵

A further extrapolation of the *Easy Rider* production methods came in the use of nonprofessional actors sourced on locations. *Easy Rider* incorporated residents of onscreen locations for key scenes, most memorably in the Louisiana café scene, during the filming of which Hopper rejected members of the local amateur theatre company in favour of the clientele who happened to be in the café at the time of production. *Two-Lane Blacktop*, however, is almost completely populated with nonprofessional actors, from the untrained dramatic leads (excepting Oates), to the gas station attendants and store clerks. Actual street-racers were sourced from real street-racing clubs, appearing onscreen along with their cars, a proposition which on many occasions was initially met with suspicion. State police also appeared onscreen, equally distrustful of the filmmaker’s intentions; all of these roles were cast on location as the production rolled through towns.⁵⁶ A similar sense of lived-in realism was brought to the roles played by Taylor, Wilson and Bird when Hellman decided not to utilise a costuming department, but instead took the performers to opportunity shops in downtown Los Angeles where they could pick out their clothing. All three wear the same outfits for the duration of the film: jeans, blue work shirts, and denim jackets for Taylor and Wilson, and jeans and an army surplus jacket for Bird; nondescript, contemporary fashions.⁵⁷

Two anecdotes from the production of *Two-Lane Blacktop* illustrate practical outcomes that Hellman was able to obtain through his unconventional production practices. One noteworthy sequence, in which the girl panhandles for change from

⁵⁴ Kurtz, audio commentary.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ There are only a few exceptions, where real actors were brought on location from elsewhere: TV bitplayers Bill Keller, Katherine Squire and a young Harry Dean (credited as “H D”) Stanton as hitchhikers, good ol’ boy character actor Alan Vint as a young man in a diner.

⁵⁷ Hellman, audio commentary.

tourists in Needles, California, was shot in an unsealed public square, with the telephoto lens-equipped camera concealed in an adjoining department store building. A mix of employed extras and unwitting members of the general public were solicited for change on camera, and asked to sign release forms after the camera stopped rolling, a process which allowed natural, unguarded reactions to be caught onscreen.

More fundamentally, Hellman's decision to shoot in chronological sequence permitted him to withhold the screenplay in its entirety from all of the performers bar Oates. This creative decision further blurred the line between documentary and fiction, as the performers found themselves not just living through the experience of the cross-country road journey both on-camera and off, but also reacting to the various situations of the screenplay for the first time as the cameras rolled. Under this model, the actors approached each scene without the foreknowledge of what lay ahead, or the days of preparation typically afforded by more traditional approaches to performance in Hollywood. For Hellman, his performers "didn't need to know any more than what [had] happened before, but not [what] was going to happen, because in life you don't know what's going to happen the next day".⁵⁸ As with Hopper's (mis)direction of the Louisiana café sequence, in which he coaxed hostility from non-professional performers by telling them beforehand that Billy, Wyatt and George had raped and murdered a group of local teens, Hellman captured his principals reacting, rather than acting. About half way through the shoot, Hellman's unorthodox method began to upset the power dynamic between director and actor, chafing Taylor in particular, who "really felt that he was out of control, that he had no control over his life. He refused to go on unless [Hellman] gave him the script", with the director finally relenting.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Hellman, audio commentary.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

These two directorial decisions by Hellman illustrate how departures from Classical modes of Hollywood production can shape aesthetic outcomes. In the above-cited examples, the circumstances of *Two-Lane Blacktop*'s production are manifested onscreen through the striking authenticity of the locations and supporting cast, and the deadpan naturalism of the untrained actors. Like *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces* before it, with their Mardi Gras and oil rig sequences respectively, *Two-Lane Blacktop* features documentary-style sequences that employ rapidly cut, non-causally motivated montage, handheld camera, non-synchronous sound, continuous soundscapes, and the use of wide angle lens. These sequences are less concerned with imparting narrative or causal information than they are in working towards establishing an impressionistic sense of the world each film inhabits: the documentary-style montage sequences in all three films are attuned to the nuances of their contemporary, real-world American settings. Like the New Orleans sequence of *Easy Rider*, Hellman allows his characters to interact with real people moving through the real world, allows his cameras to simply observe, and later pieces the results into an associational montage. In the case of *Two-Lane Blacktop*, Hellman and Kurtz hired out an actual speedway in Memphis, and staged a drag race that was open to the public. As in the Needles, California sequence described earlier, Taylor, Wilson, Bird and Oates were turned loose to freely mingle amongst the assembled throng gathered to watch the high performance vehicles race, under the observation of roaming, documentary-style cameras.

This is one example of how the small crew and on-the-fly production of *Two-Lane Blacktop* helped to define the look of the final film, characterised by minimal editing, long takes, wide framing, use of available light and high speed film stock, even for night scenes, which are often underexposed to the point where the screen is almost entirely black. The outcome is both an extension of and testament to the low-

budget context from which the film emerged, and Hellman has acknowledged the intertwined relationship of production style and aesthetic outcome, wryly stating that “the austerity in my work is a result of the austerity in the budgets”.⁶⁰ In *Two-Lane Blacktop*, Hellman’s aesthetic is workmanlike, bare bones, sparse. The film offers few of the moments of lyricism that punctuate *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces*. Instead, it offers a series of cinematic experiences that do not much resemble what would usually be expected of Hollywood (or, for that matter, New Hollywood) output: flat, static *mise-en-scène*, inexpressively naturalistic performances, elliptical edits that often omit key plot points, and the corresponding inclusion of narratively unmotivated “in-between moments that most filmmakers would automatically cut,” as the central characters spend long periods of time on screen eating silently in diners, sipping cans of Coca-Cola, huddled in anonymous hotel rooms, and generally lounging nonchalantly.⁶¹ *Two-Lane Blacktop* arrives at new places for a Hollywood studio film. Hellman’s unrushed approach to the passage of cinematic time places him in the company of such post-French New Wave directors as Eric Rohmer and Maurice Pialat. In the same moment, Dennis Hopper was attempting to channel the influence of Godard in *The Last Movie*, even as Godard’s intellectual currency was diminishing with American critics. As Godard’s moment passed, Hellman’s engagement with the more contemporary practices of French art cinema aligns with the positive reception that kept *Ride in the Whirlwind* and *The Shooting* playing in cinemas in France for extended runs over several months. Clearly, Hellman, more so than perhaps any other figure of the New Hollywood, was aligned with French cinematic tastes and practices. Suffice to say, with *Two-Lane Blacktop*, Hellman’s cinematic style veered into territory that was the very anathema to the carefully developed, streamlined rules of Classical Hollywood storytelling - territory to which

⁶⁰ Monte Hellman interview, *Monte Hellman: American Auteur* (dir. George Hickenlooper, 1997), *Two-Lane Blacktop* DVD, distributed by Umbrella Entertainment, 2007.

⁶¹ Jones, “The Cylinders Were Whispering My Name”, p. 181.

Hollywood has rarely returned. Where *Easy Rider*'s aimless motor journey was ultimately Classically told, *Two-Lane Blacktop* more closely conveys the actual experience of those long hours traversing America's endless road to nowhere (although it is worth noting that Hopper's unseen extended cut of *Easy Rider* may have offered a more similarly expansive experience).

More so than *Easy Rider*, which depicts the swirling social climate from which it emerged, *Two-Lane Blacktop* comes closest to offering a pseudo-documentary look at the experience of youth in aimless revolt in early-1970s America. Its casting of non-professional performers and its fidelity to real-world locations and their inhabitants are two important steps towards the development of this style. The fact that the crew actually undertook the cross-country journey depicted leads Hellman to dub the film, "a time capsule. The route that we were following was the original Route 66... it pretty much doesn't exist anymore... [the film is] a record of a time that was very important in American history, and has been lost".⁶² Elsewhere, Kurtz expresses similar sentiments when evaluating the film retrospectively: "There's certainly a lot of images of small town America in the late '60s early '70s recorded here that are probably not anywhere near the same anymore".⁶³ The diners, gas stations and parking lots the protagonists pass through are as thoroughly authentic as they are unremarkable; these landmarks are as indicative of the contemporary experience of American youth as the Coca Cola signs that frequently adorn their walls.

That Hellman's production practices could have been applied to a Hollywood film would have been inconceivable had the industry not been broadsided by the success of *Easy Rider*. Hellman acknowledges such a debt when he says, "the end of the '60s was a... fortunate time to be making films, purely because of one movie –

⁶² Hellman, *You Can Never Go Fast Enough*.

⁶³ Kurtz, audio commentary.

Easy Rider’’.⁶⁴ The influence of *Easy Rider* reverberates through *Two-Lane Blacktop*, but the colour and dynamism of the earlier film are noticeably muted here. *Two-Lane Blacktop* offers a dim reflection of *Easy Rider*’s drug-addled *joy de vivre*, after a prolonged two-year come-down from Hopper’s giddy high. Where the spirit of *Easy Rider* is personified in the fast-talking hyperactivity of Hopper’s Billy and Oates’ GTO, *Two-Lane Blacktop* shares its temperament with Fonda’s Wyatt, Taylor’s driver, and Wilson’s mechanic: softly spoken, seemingly unconcerned by worldly affairs, aloof, vaguely damaged.

Hellman did follow Hopper’s footsteps in one regard: editing. Hellman’s loose and freewheeling directorial approach not only freed him to experiment with his performers and use of locations, but it also left him with an abundance of filmed material. As was the case with *Easy Rider*, Hellman originally turned in a much longer first cut: three-and-a-half hours in this case, despite a contractual obligation to deliver a film under two hours. Much like *Easy Rider*, one of the first scenes to be excised was the original opening (although in the case of *Easy Rider*, the opening scene as scripted was never filmed). As such, *Two-Lane Blacktop* begins in media res, with the driver and mechanic taking part in an illegal street race that is quickly interrupted by the police. This sequence is in fact a stitching together of two different scenes from the initial cut. Like *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces*, *Two-Lane Blacktop* begins with its story already in motion, refusing to meter out expository information, demanding that its audience put in a certain amount of guesswork, a process foreign to those acclimatised to the clear and steady storytelling style of Classical Hollywood. But where *Five Easy Pieces* delivered a modicum of narrative satisfaction by eventually revealing the true nature of Bobby Dupea’s origins, and *Easy Rider* never truly strayed outside a morally conservative narrative sphere, punishing its

⁶⁴ Hellman, *American Auteur*.

protagonists for their transgressions as is consistent with a Classical Hollywood model, *Two-Lane Blacktop* offers no such satisfactions. The consistent feature of its mode of storytelling is one of frustration.

The film opens with the standard animated image of the revolving Universal globe. Gone, however, is the familiar fanfare, replaced by the roaring of a car engine, suggesting the high-octane thrills promised in the trailer and tagline. The first scene depicts, in a detached, pseudo-documentary style, the 1955 Chevy taking part in an illegal drag race that is cut short by the arrival of the police. This sequence quickly establishes the mode the film will follow throughout its duration, depicting a world of fast cars in remarkably static terms, as documentary-style handheld shots taken in low-light conditions are intercut with longer wide shots recorded from a fixed camera position. After Taylor's driver watches an initial street race preceding his, the Chevy excitingly leaps off the mark, then reverses back into position, while a static long shot gazes down the stretch of road upon which the race will take place. After the adjudicator displays his torches, which change from red to green, the cars take off, Hellman holding on this long shot as the cars disappear into the centre of the frame racing towards the vanishing point of the straight stretch of road. The subsequent shot finds the camera positioned at the side of the roadway, with the second race adjudicator at the right edge of the frame, observing as the Chevy and its competitor race into frame left, the Chevy crossing the finish line first by a nose. Only at this point does Hellman cut to the interior space of the Chevy cabin, with a point-of-view shot representing the driver's field of vision as his car decelerates after the race, and an oncoming police car comes into view. In forgoing any cross-cutting between the two competitors, the interiors and exteriors of the cars, but rather by simply holding on a long shot of the two vehicles disappearing into the distance, Hellman excises the kind of excitement that could be expected of such an opening sequence of a film

primarily concerned with street racing. This opening sequence sets the tone by establishing a dramatic moment of cinematic action that is subsequently truncated and subverted by the mode of its representation, setting up the audience with a particular set of expectations, which are then confused by Hellman's stylistic modes of representation of (in)action.

After initially invoking, and then subverting a number of generic signifiers, the film drifts aimlessly through a number of non-narrative scenarios for its first half hour, depicting non-causally-salient episodes from the daily life of its protagonists that play like the most directionless moments of *Easy Rider* projected at half speed, as the mechanic changes the tyres on the Chevy, banter with a gas station attendant, and, with the driver, makes small-talk with the girl. The film's plot introduces a clear objective 30 minutes in, when the driver challenges GTO to race to him to Washington, D.C. for pink slips. Hellman himself says of this moment that, "the real start of the movie... is when they make the bet," a statement as misleading as his film.⁶⁵ All of *Two-Lane Blacktop*'s formal systems work to undermine this narrative objective. The deadpan performances of Taylor, Wilson, Bird, and the majority of the non-professional extras inhibit the generation of drama (the exception being Oates, whose manic performance is riddled with deliberate inconsistencies and anachronisms), while the camera regards its subjects from a deliberately detached distance, with minimal editing. Scenes that would provide particular thrills within a more generically coherent mode of stylistic representation pointedly undermine and work against viewer expectations in *Two-Lane Blacktop*. For example, midway through the film, the occupants of the Chevy and GTO converge on a small Oklahoma town in the early hours of the morning to repair the carburettor on the GTO, only to be interrupted by a local police cruiser. As the mechanic, temporarily

⁶⁵ Hellman, *You Can Never Go Fast Enough*.

behind the wheel of the GTO, steers off the right edge of the frame, the driver takes a right in the Chevy, heading up over a rise deeper into the space of the frame, pursued by the police car. Before the police car has disappeared over the line of the horizon, Hellman cuts to a static shot of the driver standing at the counter of an automobile parts shop. His arrival at this destination, and, more pressingly, his evasion of the police pursuit, is never acknowledged by the story. Hellman instead sees fit to hold on this wide shot for twenty eight seconds as Taylor places his order, and the store attendant looks the part up in his inventory, fetches the item, and begins writing out a receipt for his customer. Taylor and Wilson are offered no scene of onscreen reunion after this unseen police pursuit, but next share the screen together almost two minutes later, when GTO comes across the two, already reunited with one another and the girl, in a diner, their conversation as laconic and unconcerned as ever. No verbal reference is made to, nor any dramatic emphasis placed on, the fact that the driver has just evaded the police car. Hellman chooses to cut away from a starting-point for narrative action (the car chase), and replaces it with the mundane activity of Taylor buying mechanical parts at an indeterminate point of time after escaping from the police. Formally, the film further subverts generic expectations, as the shot framings and *mise-en-scène* downplay what is seen of the car chase, regarding the onscreen action from a distant, fixed position as the cars disappear over the horizon. Meanwhile, the absence of soundtrack music and complex editing further dampen any excitement in the scene, right up until the elliptical hard cut that eliminates the outcome of the car chase altogether.

This subversion of generic expectations is at odds with the way the promotional materials that accompanied the release of *Two-Lane Blacktop*. Sold to its prospective audience with an emphasis on high-speed thrills, Hellman's film is, in execution, glacially-paced. Further misleading pre-release expectations was the fact

that *Two-Lane Blacktop* was anticipated by a modicum of hype in strange places: in April of 1971, the front page of *Esquire* magazine pre-emptively proclaimed it the magazine's "nomination for the movie of the year," and "the first movie worth reading," taking the unusual step of publishing Rudolph Wurlitzer and Will Corry's screenplay in full as its front-page feature article.⁶⁶ This prominent endorsement, accompanied by the casting of popular rock musicians Taylor and Wilson and an exciting trailer that emphasised such generic elements as street races, fast cars, the cross-country race between the Chevy and the GTO, and the battle between the occupants of those cars for the affections of the girl: all of these promotional factors were coded signals informing the youth audience that two years earlier had laid \$19 million at the feet of *Easy Rider* that this was the film they had been waiting for. Only, *Two-Lane Blacktop* was not the film the studio material purported it to be, Hellman's sparse, meditative style making even the most introspective moments of *Easy Rider* look like *The Great Race* (dir. Blake Edwards, Warner Bros., 1965) by comparison. And this comparison assumes that youth-cult road movie fans made it to the cinema at all: Oates would later publicly complain that the film had been horribly under-promoted ("Nobody's spending any money on advertising!"), missing its audience entirely.⁶⁷ The situation was not helped when *Esquire* unprecedentedly withdrew its "movie of the year" nomination for *Two-Lane Blacktop* in its September 1971 issue, just months after its commercial and critical failure. Attempting to distance himself from the from the film his publication had so loudly championed, *Esquire* editor Harold T.P. Hayes slammed the film:

The screenplay was wonderful... but the film is vapid: the photography arch and tricky and naturally, therefore, poorly lit and unfocussed; the acting... amateurish, disingenuous and wooden; the direction introverted to the degree

⁶⁶ Rudolph Wurlitzer and Will Corry, "*Two-Lane Blacktop*" screenplay, *Esquire*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (April 1971), front page and pp. 104-114, 142, 144.

⁶⁷ Compo, p. 235.

that fundamental relationships become incidental to the film's purpose. The script has become a victim of the *auteur* principle.⁶⁸

This final sentence indicates an exhaustion with the very kind of directorial freedom that is ordinarily considered to be synonymous with the New Hollywood moment. While there are differences between the screenplay and the final cut of *Two-Lane Blacktop*, they are not nearly so dramatic as Hayes' editorial would have one believe. In terms of plot arc, Rudolph Wurlitzer and Will Corry's screenplay that appeared in *Esquire* is faithfully represented in Hellman's film. The director's main omissions fall into two categories, the first concerning expository details of the day-to-day lived experience of the Chevy's driver and mechanic: sleeping bags, campfires, wrangling the financial conditions before a street-race, spoken references to cars (the deletion of this final point lends a kind of out-of-time omnipresence to the '55 Chevy in the theatrical cut). The second category of edited material develops the romantic relationship between Laurie Bird's girl and James Taylor's driver. Indeed, given that Hellman was initially drawn to Wurlitzer to rewrite Corry's initial draft of the screenplay on the strength of a group sex scene in the writer's novel *Nog* (1969), *Two-Lane Blacktop*, like *Easy Rider* before it, is in many ways a remarkably chaste film. Sexual activity is limited to offscreen moaning from Bird and Wilson, overheard by Taylor outside their motel room early in the film, and a single onscreen kiss shared by Taylor and Bird much later. By contrast, in Wurlitzer's screenplay the Taylor and Bird characters impulsively and wordlessly have sex on the first night she joins their journey, while the mechanic lies nearby in his sleeping bag. Later in the screenplay, "The Driver unbuttons the Girl's blouse and kisses her breasts," in the presence of the mechanic, GTO, and a watching farm boy in a country field.⁶⁹ The frank and unabashed depiction of sexuality in Wurlitzer's screenplay more firmly aligns *Two-*

⁶⁸ Harold T.P. Hayes, "Editor's Notes", *Esquire*, Vol. 75, No. 9 (September 1971), p. 12.

⁶⁹ Wurlitzer and Corry, p. 112.

Lane Blacktop with an imagined youth-audience exploitation narrative mould.

Wurlitzer's screenplay is also full of impenetrably technical mechanical jargon, such as, "I ain't sure if each lobe of the breaker cam is passing under the rubber block on the point arm. You know what I mean?"⁷⁰ and:

Look, what you need is a big Chevy Rat Motor that cranks in the mid elevens.

Get yourself a '68 427 Chevy and stroke it out to 454. Get some L-88 heads, a Sig Erson cam, Crane roller-bearing rocker arms and Crower lifters.

Thompson rods. Put on a three-barrel Holley with a 1050 rating... There's a lot more. Hell, you could really honk.⁷¹

Despite its impenetrability, such language could be perceived as a deliberate attempt on Wurlitzer's part to authentically engage his film with the kind of obsessive youth car culture in which it is based. Where such dialogue does appear in Hellman's film, it is in a markedly truncated form, delivered in such muted tones, and regarded with trademark detachment, that it is hard to imagine much excitement being generated amongst rev-heads in the audience. Hellman's systematic underplaying of such generic material is just one example of his continual subversion of generic expectations.

Some of Hellman's deletions from Wurlitzer's screenplay barely alter the shape of the narrative, but nonetheless shift the emphasis of the film. For example, towards the end of Wurlitzer's screenplay, following a near-collision with a fatal road-hazard, the mechanic reveals to the girl that the pink slips for the vehicle that he and the driver submitted to GTO were in fact phony. This information recasts the film's dramatic arc in an entirely different light, the unsporting subterfuge on the part of the Chevy's occupants causing the stakes of the car race that has motivated the entire screenplay to be re-evaluated.

⁷⁰ Wurlitzer and Corry, p. 113.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 110

Needless to say, the disappointment that *Esquire*'s Harold T.P. Hayes finds in the disparities between Wurlitzer's and Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktops* has far more to do with tone and mood than with excision. The root of this difference comes at the level of production, as a direct result of the creative freedom afforded to Hellman in the wake of the success of *Easy Rider*. A major point of comparison is the representation of the mad dash Taylor's driver makes at the end of the film to catch up to Bird after she leaves the Memphis race-track with GTO. To compare the sequence as described in Wurlitzer's screenplay with Hellman's rendition of the same series of events is to find two very different modes of emphasis. Wurlitzer's screenplay, in part, reads:

The Car. The Driver keeps the Car flat out at 147 m.p.h. His hands clench the wheel. His mouth is tight with anxiety. The Mechanic, unable to look at the Driver, watches the road. His face is grim, even frightened. The Driver is taking chances: Passing a truck at the top of a hill. Blasting through a small town at 140 m.p.h. Taking corners on two wheels.

MECHANIC (*as the driver squeals around a corner*): *Easy... Take... It... easy. You're gonna kill us.*

The driver doesn't hear.⁷²

At this point in the film, the narrative has already provided the high-stakes impetus for the action, as the geographical finish line for the race draws near, and Taylor's driver must win back the girl. To read this short sequence as scripted conjures several possibilities for excitement to be generated through formal means: whip pans of the Chevy racing through the country-side, undercranked, low-angle footage of the road flashing past, frantic cross-cutting between the interior and exterior of the car intercut with flashes of close-ups of the driver's steely, focussed gaze, steering wheel death-

⁷² Wurlitzer and Corry, p. 142, emphasis in original

grip, and the mechanic's sweating brow, all set to an urgent soundtrack. All in all, Wurlitzer's penultimate sequence evokes a sense of climactic, high-speed excitement. Hellman's filming of said sequence shares the stylistic characteristics he employs throughout the rest of the film: namely wide framing, minimal editing and the absence of non-diegetic sound or music. The mechanic's line, "easy, easy, man, you're going to kill us," is delivered in an interior shot of the Chevy (**Fig 1.1**) after a cut from a similar shot from inside the GTO (**Fig 1.2**).



Fig 1.1



Fig 1.2

The lack of an exterior shot of the Chevy prior to the mechanic's line means that the sound of the engine is the only indicator to the audience that the driver is in fact driving recklessly. The subsequent shots of the Chevy overtaking another vehicle at high speed, and a shot of Taylor's face as he drives, are so underexposed due to the low light conditions in which they were filmed that it is difficult to appreciate the peril inherent in the dangerous overtaking manoeuvre. Despite the squealing tyres, thundering engine, and honking horn aurally indicating danger, the visual mode of the film holds the moment at arm's length. A similar disparity between content and context is found in the subsequent two shots, echoing the previous graphic match found in **Figs 1.1** and **1.2**. The first shot is a point-of-view shot looking out the windscreen of the GTO, with Oates driving relatively lackadaisically through a woodland environment. The unhurried feeling of this moment is emphasised by the almost comical lounge muzack that plays from the car stereo. This is followed by a

hard cut to a graphically-matched interior shot looking out the windscreen of the Chevy as the driver races around a corner, and finds himself stuck behind a lumbering truck, which he hurriedly overtakes on a corner. This impulsive moment of high-speed driving is as exciting as anything in *Two-Lane Blacktop*, but is regarded with Hellman's cool, dispassionate camera eye, the unbroken, documentary nature of the long-take capturing the reality of the moment, but steadfastly refusing to invest it with illegitimate excitement through the artifice of cinematic manipulation. Hellman offers the image, and the image alone. The result of these directorial decisions means that this high-stakes sequence plays with the same kind of detached, impassive, observational tone that abounds throughout Hellman's film. By deliberately undercutting narrative drive through his self-consciously deadpan representation of crucial narrative moments, Hellman deflates any superficial sense of suspense, in turn simultaneously piercing and exposing generic convention. Similar games play out in the way the contemplative, zen-like *The Shooting* quickly abandons the western formula and becomes mired in existential abstraction. Hellman freezes his narratives at moments of existential crisis, allowing his films to dwell upon the dilation of cinematic time and character inaction.

A detailed formal analysis of *Two-Lane Blacktop*'s climactic sequence, in which all four characters converge on a diner in the early morning, demonstrates Hellman's subtle but complex play with *mise-en-scene*, camera positioning and staging, and frustration of narrative momentum. Hellman's use of cinematic form evokes a specifically downbeat tone that overrides Wurlitzer's ironic intent as written. In the screenplay, immediately after the girl leaves the driver and GTO at the diner, Taylor's character again becomes embroiled in another street-race challenge from a young coupé owner. During the negotiations of the wager, GTO clandestinely slips past, his covert "see ya" only passingly acknowledged by an otherwise-engaged

mechanic, and altogether ignored by Taylor. This offhand culmination to the competitive relationship that has motivated the entire screenplay casts the film in the cool, ironic, commercially-approved, unmotivated narratives of figures like Arthur Penn, Mike Nichols and Hal Ashby.

Hellman's direction of this sequence employs the same detached cinematic and dramatic style that typifies his aesthetic approach throughout *Two-Lane Blacktop*, as his arrangement of *mise-en-scène* simultaneously subverts narrative expectations and subtly conveys expository narrative information. The scene begins with a medium-wide shot of GTO and the girl sitting at a table in the diner, centrally framed. The parking lot is visible through the window behind them, while the as-yet narratively-unmotivated motorcycle occupies a prominent portion of the frame in a piece of visual foreshadowing.⁷³ The familiar yellow of the vehicle from which GTO takes his moniker is partially obscured by Bird's head at frame right. (**Fig 1.3**)



Fig 1.3



Fig 1.4

GTO silently forks eggs into his mouth and the girl sips from her coffee cup as the Chevy appears through the window behind them at screen left on the road that laterally bisects the frame at an uneasily canted angle, and turns into the parking, advancing towards the window, and coming to park at screen left, behind the seated

⁷³ Earlier, the presence of the motorcyclist was telegraphed in the sequence depicting GTO and the girl's arrival at the diner. In the establishing exterior shot of the diner, the motorcycle prominently occupied the centre of the frame, and in the subsequent interior shot, the motorcyclist himself occupied the centre of the frame as GTO and the girl moved through the deep-focus framing to take their seats at the table located at the rear of the frame.

GTO (**Fig 1.4**). As the car advances, the girl looks around at it, then stares dejectedly at the table. GTO, meanwhile, simply chews his eggs, gazing at an indeterminate point in front of him, a gloomy look coming across his face. As the Chevy comes to a halt behind him, without turning to look at it, he simply says, “shit.” GTO continues to sit, picking up his slice of toast and taking a bite, while the girl, at frame right, does nothing. In the background of the frame, the driver and the mechanic get out of their car, and walk off the left edge of the frame, leaving GTO and the girl to occupy the frame for nine seconds before the driver appears in the foreground of screen left, inside the diner, taking a seat that occupies the lower left corner of the frame, his back to the camera. Wilson moves in front of the camera momentarily, and takes a seat at lower screen right.

There is then a further nine seconds of inaction as the four characters sit at the table together in silence, the driver and mechanic with their backs to the camera, while the girl avoids making eye contact with the new arrivals and GTO stares at Taylor. By the time the film cuts to a medium close-up of Taylor for his first line of dialogue, this shot has lasted for 33 seconds, and focused on character inaction across multiple planes of screen space at a point of narrative crisis. (**Fig 1.5**)



Fig 1.5



Fig 1.6

The film cuts from a medium close-up of the driver, (“figured we’d go up to Columbus, Ohio. There’s a man there who’s got some parts he wants to sell real cheap”) to a medium close-up reverse shot of the girl, as she offers no reaction (five

seconds in length [Fig 1.6]), then cuts back to the medium-close-up of the driver for a silent three seconds. The next shot echoes the initial shot configuration, with the driver and the mechanic at the extremes of screen left and right respectively, their backs to the camera, and GTO and the girl positioned deeper within the frame at the opposing corners of the table, the parking lot visible behind them in upper half of the frame. As the girl silently contemplates her answer for six seconds, two anonymous youths appear in the parking lot at screen left, wander into the middle of the frame, and begin inspecting the Chevy. The visual prominence within the frame afforded to the new arrivals would conventionally indicate their narrative importance; their appearance gently derails the dramatic tension of the scene, drawing the eye of the spectator away from the girl's mumbled reply, "no good." (Fig 1.7) A three second reaction(less) reverse shot of Taylor follows, in which no readable emotion plays across his face. (Fig 1.8)



Fig 1.7



Fig 1.8

The film subsequently cuts to a new spatial configuration, a medium-wide shot of the young motorcyclist, a character who had previously only been seen in the interior establishing shot when GTO and the girl entered the diner (the *mise-en-scène* is echoed in this later shot; the original shot is recreated in Fig 1.9, and the later shot in Fig 1.10), and in momentary cutaway shots narratively justified as occupying the girl's point of view.



Fig 1.9



Fig 1.10

By this point in the film, the motorcyclist has not been seen for almost three minutes of screen time, and his most significant contribution to the film at present has been a brief, searching gaze at the girl several minutes ago, yet he now prominently occupies the centre of the frame. This seemingly unmotivated cut temporarily disorients the spectator, who is cut adrift from the conversation between the principal characters at the table, requiring the viewer to reorient themselves to the landmarks of the grey Chevy, partially visible through the window at the left extremity of the frame, or to the out-of-focus quartet of GTO, the girl, the driver, and the obscured mechanic, seated at the right edge of the frame. By cutting to a character who occupies no position of narrative significance as yet, nor any narratively-motivated relationship with any of the characters, who does not even occupy an easily-identifiable position within the established space of the scene, and by inserting such a cut in the middle of a scene that would objectively appear to be one of extreme narrative importance, Hellman confuses and frustrates the expectations of his audience, while simultaneously forcing them to participate in an active process of piecing together spatial relationships. The motorcyclist scrounges in his pocket for change to pay the offscreen waitress, and GTO stands up from the table and walks across the back of the frame to exit screen left. As Oates completes his movement across the frame, the motorcyclist turns away from the camera, donning his jacket, his eyeline suggesting that he is gazing at the girl (**Fig 1.11**). Her out-of-focus head follows his movement as he walks away from the camera, and exits through the door at the left of the frame

(**Fig 1.12**). This leaves the girl and the driver the only characters on-screen, dwarfed by the enormity of the empty shot. They occupy the blurry rightmost extreme of a frame otherwise filled with the ephemera of the vacant diner: formica tabletops, empty chairs, sugar jars (**Fig 1.13**). The girl stands, moves towards the door, similarly pulling on her matching military jacket, and exits through the door, through which she can be seen opening the door of the yellow GTO (**Fig 1.14**). This is a moment of complete narrative dissolution, as the goals of the protagonists are totally abandoned, the characters themselves sequentially filing out of the frame, leaving the driver a blurry figure at the rear of the frame, seated with his back to the camera. This is a suitably muted moment of isolation and abandonment that prefigures his cinematic immolation at the conclusion of the film, the gulf between the driver and the girl literalised in the expanse of negative space that fills the frame, as the two characters are positioned at the extremities of the shot. In total, this shot lasts for forty-five seconds, with only the slightest of camera movements to adjust framing as characters exit the shot.



Fig 1.11



Fig 1.12



Fig 1.13



Fig 1.14

The next shot may represent the driver's point of view from within the diner, a static shot depicting the yellow GTO parked front-on to the camera at frame right, with the girl in the centre of the frame foraging in the back of the car. At the background frame centre is the motorcyclist, who sits stoically as Bird retrieves her bag from the car (**Fig 1.15**), and moves back through the space of the frame to him (**Fig 1.16**).



Fig 1.15



Fig 1.16

The film cuts to a medium-close-up reaction shot of the driver, again displaying no overt facial expression. The only movement in this six-second shot is a slight muscle twitch in his cheek. The film then cuts back to the point of view shot, as the girl pauses by the motorcycle and discards her bags, and the motorcyclist kick-starts the bike. The film then cuts to a previously unseen angle of the diner, revealing a jukebox at frame left, a cigarette machine and sunglasses rack at frame right, and GTO emerging from a field of knick-knack paraphernalia in the centre of the frame, his eyeline being drawn to the right of frame as he steps closer to the camera (**Fig 1.17**). Another cut, another new perspective on the action. The previous shot, in which GTO's eyeline was drawn to the right edge of the frame, and the established spatial relationships of the location, suggest that this new perspective of the diner exterior represents GTO's point of view, similar, but different to the earlier shot from the driver's point of view: in the centre of the frame Bird stands by the motorcycle, while to the right of the frame, positioned much closer to the foreground of the shot, the two anonymous local youths who have gone unseen for the last minute and a half,

continue to fawn over the Chevy (**Fig 1.18**). As one of the youths moves off the right edge of the frame, the motorcycle moves leftwards, traveling up the driveway, turning right onto the road, executing a movement that diagonally bisects the shot as Bird exits frame, and the film (**Fig 1.19**). Momentarily, the frame is once again left empty, occupied only by the youth at the right edge, in a position graphically matched to the one formerly occupied by the driver when the girl earlier stepped outside.



Fig 1.17



Fig 1.18



Fig 1.19



Fig 1.20

The film cuts back to the medium-wide show of Oates, who turns his head to meet the camera's gaze. The next shot reveals another new spatial configuration, for the first time depicting the mechanic at the table alongside the driver, who occupy the left and right halves of the frame respectively in a medium shot composition (**Fig 1.20**). The preceding shot, which concluded with GTO looking directly at camera, suggests an eyeline match with this subsequent shot, the new camera angle representing Oates' point of view. Taylor's determined gaze offscreen left (or straight ahead from the seating position he occupies in relation to the camera) is focused on the offscreen window from which GTO just turned his attention, having watched the girl depart on

the motorcycle, although the number of new angles which have been introduced since Taylor's position at the table was last onscreen may well obscure this relationship to the viewer, and lead them to conclude that the driver's eyeline is instead meeting GTO's. The driver glances down at the table, the mechanic drinks from a coffee cup and glances sidelong at the driver, who attempts to meet his gaze as the mechanic turns his eyes back to the table top. Wordlessly, the driver gets to his feet, as does the mechanic a moment later, but his movement is lost to the camera, which tilts up and pans to follow the driver's rightward movement across the diner. Once the counter comes into view, the camera settles, and the driver exits screen right as GTO enters further downscreen (**Fig 1.21**). As the mechanic follows the driver offscreen, GTO moves into the centre of the frame, his gaze listlessly watching after the offscreen driver and mechanic (**Fig 1.22**). The camera holds steady as GTO disappears offscreen left, leaving the frame occupied only by the rows of nick knacks and diner stools for three seconds (**Fig 1.23**) before GTO emerges again from the left of frame, strides purposely to the counter where he leaves his money (**Fig 1.24**), then exits the static shot at screen right.



Fig 1.21



Fig 1.22



Fig 1.23



Fig 1.24

Another cut, another new camera angle of the location. For the first time, an exterior perspective of the diner shopfront is seen, the building stretching at a sharp oblique angle deep into the space of the shot, while an elevated Esso logo hovers in the upper rightmost corner of the frame (**Fig 1.25**). GTO exits the door of the diner, and the camera pans to follow his rightward movement, past the driver, seated on the hood of the Chevy, his back to the camera (**Fig 1.26**) and the local youth, whose dialogue with Taylor dominates the soundtrack after the silence of the preceding minutes:

COUPE OWNER: This is a bitch of a car.

DRIVER: Yeah yours isn't bad either.

COUPE OWNER: Whadda ya got in it?

DRIVER: What's it worth for you to find out?

COUPE OWNER: Fifty?

DRIVER: Make it a hundred. Where you guys race around here?⁷⁴

The driver's dialogue fades from prominence on the soundtrack as the quick pan, following GTO's stride, moves past the car, revealing the mechanic on the other side the vehicle. "See ya," says GTO to the mechanic as he walks past (**Fig 1.27**), before the camera cuts him too from the screen, the continuing pan taking in the yellow

⁷⁴ This is one instance where Hellman was relatively faithful to Wurlitzer's technical dialogue, which read: "COUPE OWNER: That's a bitchin' car you got there/ DRIVER: (*his voice flat and tired; he speaks the ritual without feeling* [notably, a direction it seems Taylor brought to most every scene in his performance]): Yeah... Yours ain't so bad either. What you got underneath? A big Chrysler Hemi?/COUPE OWNER: It might cost you a little to find out./DRIVER: We got plenty of time. I reckon we could see you for a hundred". Wurlitzer and Corry, p. 144.

Pontiac GTO, which occupies almost the entire frame, following Oates to his driver-side door (**Fig 1.28**).



Fig 1.25



Fig 1.26



Fig 1.27



Fig 1.28

Oates starts his car, and the camera adjusts its framing slightly as he reverses back into the middle of the frame, and offscreen entirely. Once again, the screen is unoccupied, with only a small amount of the rear fender and wheel of the Chevy peeping into the lower left corner of the frame, while the rest of the shot holds on the driveway and road on which the girl disappeared from the film (**Fig 1.29**). There is a sound of gravel crunching under tyre as GTO accelerates and departs, yet unexpectedly he does not exit on the driveway we saw Bird take. In fact, the car does not move into the frame again, and the shot holds for a further 11 seconds on the empty parking lot, driveway, and road.



Fig 1.29

The manipulations of film style employed by Hellman in this sequence are indicative of his directorial practices throughout *Two-Lane Blacktop*. Committed to studious minimalism in his camerawork and editing, employing cutting and camera movement sparingly, Hellman incorporates conventional Hollywood stylistic practices such as the shot-reverse-shot, eyeline matches, and the close-up reaction shot, yet uses them to capture moments that consistently play against the grain of Classical Hollywood storytelling style – for example, reaction shots with no reaction, a determined aversion to heightening any sense of drama at the very point of dramatic crisis, and characters abandoning the film itself. Hellman simultaneously cuts away to shots that flagrantly violate the conventions of Classical style, such as disorienting cuts to new perspectives of the location space, introducing anonymous new characters to the story who occupy prominent positions within the frame, derailing the momentum of the narrative at crucial plot points, and confusing the spatial relationships of his own characters within the sequence. At the moment of narrative climax, Hellman allows time to stretch out, with lengthy silences, pauses and unmet gazes. In Wurlitzer's screenplay, this sequence of events reads like rapid-fire:

The boy at the counter slowly pays his check and stands up. He looks directly at the Girl. She returns his look. He goes outside. GTO stands up and goes to the men's room. The Girl stands up and walks out the door, after the boy. The

Mechanic and Driver watch her go over to the GTO and get her laundry bag. Then she goes over to the motorcycle and gets on the back behind the boy. GTO comes out of the mensroom in time to see the Girl ride off on the back of the motorcycle. The Mechanic takes a sip of the Girl's coffee. They both stand up and walk out the door. GTO pays the check and walks outside.⁷⁵

In Hellman's rendition, this straightforward series of events plays out over close to three minutes of screen time, making the viewer keenly aware of the inexorable passage of time, as character relationships are torn asunder and regarded with a resigned sense of indifference. In the process, Hellman defuses much of the ironic tone of Wurlitzer's screenplay, most notably in the curt farewell shared between Wilson and Oates (and the lack of a parting acknowledgement shared between Oates and Taylor). Whereas its very brevity is notable in Wurlitzer's text, in Hellman's film the moment is lost altogether in the apathetic malaise of the scene, taking the film a step further into subversion, forgoing irony in favour of a lack of narrative closure altogether. As directed by Hellman, this sequence is an intensely-choreographed piece of dramatic subversion.

These tonal shifts from page to screen are one outcome of the directorial freedom Hellman was afforded by Universal. Like *Easy Rider*, *Two-Lane Blacktop* reached cinemas whittled down from a much longer cut. Like Hopper's, Hellman's loose on-set directorial style was freewheeling and open to improvisation and the whims of on-set inspiration. His statement that, "what's exciting to me about making films is the surprises, the things that you don't know are going to happen: I love accidents," aligns very closely with comments that Hopper has made of his own approach to *Easy Rider*.⁷⁶ This approach leaves the directors with a wealth of filmed material to trawl through in the editing room, and in the case of both films some of

⁷⁵ Wurlitzer and Corry, p. 144.

⁷⁶ Hellman, *You Can Never Go Fast Enough*.

the first scenes to be excised were ones of exposition. This method can yield films with a rich sense of place and a studied expression of a single mood or tone, usually at the expense of narrative momentum or readable character psychology. Such an approach had only recently become economically viable in Hollywood, due to the introduction of new technologies such as faster film stocks and smaller camera and sound recording equipment.

Furthermore, the pursuit of a naturalistic on-set style means that scenes of narrative/dramatic significance can be delivered with such understatement that they easily pass by the viewer un-noticed. Hellman, in *Two-Lane Blacktop*, steadfastly refuses to artificially generate drama, or attribute importance where, on a narrative level at least, such artifice would traditionally be narratively, dramatically and formally warranted. Thus, according to Kent Jones, the “flavour and colour of street-racing life and the road, evoked so beautifully in Wurlitzer’s script,” is replaced by, “a trancelike absorption in movement and ritual”.⁷⁷ This end result, in *Two-Lane Blacktop*, as in the films of Hopper, can only be generated through a very specific set of production circumstances, which are in turn dependent upon a leap of faith from each film’s financiers to allow the directors to work in such a way which flies in the face of the practical and economic considerations of the process of filmmaking (although admittedly, contrary to popular belief, both Hopper and Hellman were consistently frugal in their early directorial efforts). Hollywood’s brief dalliance with the cult of the auteur in the late 1960s and early 1970s established the careers of Hellman and Hopper. The long intervals between their subsequent projects, and their eventual adoption of international production models, indicates that over a greater span of time, Hollywood did not look kindly on their unconventional production practices.

⁷⁷ Kent Jones, “*Two-Lane Blacktop*: Slow Ride”, in *Two-Lane Blacktop* DVD booklet (New York: The Criterion Collection, 2007), p. 14.

In attempting to release a film that tapped into the *Easy Rider* youth-cult audience, Universal gave Hellman a greater degree of freedom over his small budget than would traditionally be afforded to Hollywood productions. When Hellman subsequently turned in a film that seemed even stranger than the film Universal hoped he would emulate, the studio had no recourse but to continue to market the film to its initially perceived youth audience. When Hellman's artistic ambitions failed to align with the commercial prospects Universal had in mind for *Two-Lane Blacktop*, the situation was worsened by the studio decision to skew its marketing towards highlighting the generic content of the film, despite its studied avoidance and subversion of generic convention. Such narrative gestures have become a defining hallmark of the films that have been retrospectively enshrined in the New Hollywood canon. In his book *Hollywood Incoherent*, Todd Berliner talks of the ways in which *The Godfather Part II* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, Paramount Pictures, 1974) represents a trend in the 1970s Hollywood cinema towards "hinder[ing] narrative momentum and scuttl[ing] numerous opportunities to generate suspense and excitement".⁷⁸ This charge could be levelled verbatim at *Two-Lane Blacktop*. From its misleading trailer, to its tagline slogan, "You can never go fast enough," *Two-Lane Blacktop* prepared its viewers to enter a particular generic universe, which the film systematically proceeded to strip away throughout its running time.

The formal systems of *Two-Lane Blacktop* work throughout the film to downplay the generic expectations generated by the subject matter of the film. Meanwhile, the unfolding storyline leads only to dead ends, leaving *Two-Lane Blacktop* a film of narrative frustrations and contradictions. Thomas Elsaesser writes that the film offers "only the merest shadow of an intrigue, [as] the action provocatively avoids... interpersonal conflicts... and finally, the film toys with

⁷⁸ Berliner, p. 89.

goals... in an almost gratuitous, ostentatiously offhand way”.⁷⁹ The race to Washington, D.C. that motivates the action of the entire film is arbitrarily abandoned without fanfare at film’s end. Meanwhile, the relationship between driver, mechanic, and GTO is represented in contradictory ways from scene to scene. The aforementioned car chase sequence is bookended by the driver and mechanic’s attempts, in a display of sportsmanship, to source the carburettor parts for the mechanically-unsound yellow GTO so that the race can continue. This action contrasts with a scene set during the previous night, in which the Chevy passes the GTO, which has been pulled over by police officers who are questioning Oates. Taylor stops his car, and insists to the police officers that he was dangerously overtaken “a couple of miles back” by Oates, who was “weaving all over the road... He must be on something.” This sequence concludes when Oates, having seemingly talked himself out of the grasp of the police (a conclusion which, again, takes place offscreen, and goes unacknowledged onscreen), catches up to the Chevy further down the road, aggressively forces it off the road, and then shares food and alcohol with Taylor, Wilson, and Bird, as he drinks, “to [their] destruction.”

Such inconsistent behaviour is a staple for Oates’ wily GTO, who spends the entire film picking up hitchhikers and regaling them with tales from his life story. By turns he reveals himself to be an air force test pilot, a gambler who won his car “shooting craps,” a test driver from Detroit, a failed television producer on a location-scout for a “down-home movie on fast cars,” a car salesman, and a concerned son on his way to Florida to paint his ailing mother’s house. It is through the impossible contradictions of these multiple personas, fabricated in an attempt to impress each of his passengers, along with the cache of audio cassettes that he keeps on-hand (“rock, soul, hillbilly, western. What’s your taste?”), that the hollowness of GTO’s existence

⁷⁹ Elsaesser, “The Pathos of Failure”, *The Last Great American Picture Show*, p. 281.

comes to light. The elaborate backstories that he spins only serve to highlight the paucity of legitimate expository information provided about his character, and the audience is unable to determine which, if any, of the words from his mouth are truthful. GTO is ultimately defined not by the lies he tells his passengers, but by his car, which gives the character his name. GTO's banter with Taylor's driver initially consists of attempts to intimidate his opponent: "if I wanted to bother, I could suck you right up my tailpipe," "here's to your destruction," "all that speed is going to run over you one of these days. You can't be a nomad forever. Unless you flow with it, like me." These attempts at macho posturing are further misdirections from the character embroiled in a race that he is seemingly fated to lose, his off-the-lot Pontiac indistinguishable from any other, contrasting with the lovingly restored, obsessively stripped-back Chevy. "There's lots of cars on the road like yours," Taylor condescendingly tells Oates in their first conversation. Later, when Oates takes his first ride in the Chevy, he is alarmed that the car doesn't have a heater. "It slows it down," explains Taylor. Clearly, this is a race that GTO and his leather seats, car stereo, wardrobe of multi-coloured cashmere sweaters and portable bar, cannot possibly hope to win.

The contradictions of GTO's stories, along with the occasional moments when his bravura and his smile, slip, indicate a fundamental vulnerability and uncertainty at the heart of the character. This comes to the fore in the late scene when he absconds with the Laurie Bird character from the Memphis racetrack. While she sleeps in his passenger seat, Oates talks through a variety of scenarios in quick succession: they will drive aimlessly forever; they will drive to Florida, and lie around on a beach; Arizona, where they will build a house together. As he continually stops himself and starts anew with a different scenario, the mask slips, and we glimpse the desperation of a man compelled to obsessively fictionalise every element of his being. In his final

scene in the film, at an indeterminate point of time after the race has been abandoned, GTO picks up some army soldiers, and begins telling them the story of the film *Two-Lane Blacktop*, in the process erasing his own role, and casting himself as Taylor's character:

I was driving a '55 stock Chevy cross-country and I got in a race with this GTO for pink slips. I beat the GTO by three hours. Of course, the guys in the GTO couldn't drive worth a damn. Well, I'll tell you one thing: there's nothing like building up an old automobile from scratch and wiping out one of these Detroit machines. That'll give you a set of emotions that will stay with you. You know what I mean? Those satisfactions are permanent.

Oates' performance, perversely enough, offers the most richly drawn individual in a film populated with bare sketches. Like Nicholson's George Hanson in *Easy Rider*, Oates' performance dominates the film, casting its shadow over the other performances, even as Oates works with the subtler shades afforded by the limited palette of Hellman's more subdued film. Older still than Nicholson's Bobby Dupea, GTO is nonetheless equally ill-at-ease with his station in the world. So uncertain is he of his own identity that only in the uncertain, liminal space of the road can he find any kind of state that he can bear to inhabit, however uncomfortably. Too old, perhaps, to ride on of the customised motorcycles of *Easy Rider*, or the 55 Chevy, he turns to the dignified, socially-sanctioned vehicle of choice for those experiencing midlife crisis: the muscle car. Yet the desperation with which he becomes whoever he thinks his passengers expect him to be suggests that perhaps ultimately he is no more comfortable on the road than he was in his previous life, whatever that was.

Meanwhile, Taylor, Wilson and Bird give uniformly blank performances, the actions of their characters predominantly limited to standing idly by and watching on impassively as a parade of predominantly inconsequential events unfold before them.

Paul D. Zimmerman effectively summarised the style of these performances in his negative review of the film:

They are a strange race, these three in the car, the cool new breed of young people who signal instead of talking - a back rub means a night in bed, a simple shake of the head cancels a life together, a shrug and a few steps lead to a change of partners.⁸⁰

Bird's character represents another of *Two-Lane Blacktop*'s misdirections. Initially positioned as a character who could be expected to be the heterosexual love interest of the male protagonist were this a more conventional road film, Bird's girl does, in fact, function as such in the film's plot, but this plot is nevertheless dealt with in a highly unusual manner. Acting as inexpressively as the men she accompanies, Bird's character exudes an aloof sense of cool, consistently unaffected, unimpressed and unmoved by her surroundings. Hellman's depiction of her focuses on this aspect of her character, rather than aestheticising her as a romantic or sexualised object.

Despite being heard having sex offscreen with Wilson's mechanic, and sharing a driving lesson with Taylor, which is charged with sexual tension (at least, as sexually-charged as anything in the narcoleptic *Two-Lane Blacktop*) and culminates with a kiss, for the most part, the film gives Bird nothing to do but lounge in the back of the Chevy, and occasionally vacillate towards Oates' GTO. In one scene, Bird's character, stuffed in the back of the Chevy (which has no back seat), knowingly acknowledges the inherent sexism of the likes of fellow youth-cult road movies *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces*, when she complains, "why can't I ever sit up front? What is this, anyway, some kind of masculine power trip? I'm shoved back here with these goddamned tools." When the mechanic replies that they will, "need bread to do

⁸⁰ Paul D. Zimmerman, "Three for the Road" *Newsweek*, reprinted in David Denby (ed.), *Members of the National Society of Film Critics Write on Film 71-71* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), p. 148.

a little work on the carburetors and check out the rear end,” Bird retorts with “I don’t see anybody paying attention to my rear end.” Yet Bird is not entirely marginalised to sexualised terms, (as is the case with the female characters in *Easy Rider*), if for no other reason than that *Two-Lane Blacktop* is a predominantly asexual film. With no technical/mechanical skills with which she may participate within the obsessive (and masculinely gendered) world of Taylor and Wilson, the film offers her little alternative but to adopt their mode of aimlessness until she decides to leave. When she does so, wordlessly walking out on Taylor and Oates and taking up with a motorcyclist she has never met, it is as impulsive an action as when she first silently made her way to the back of the Chevy while Taylor and Wilson sat eating in a diner. When she leaves Taylor for Oates at the Memphis racetrack, and the driver insists to the mechanic that “we have to get back to her,” it is surprising because at no point in the film has he demonstrated any emotional attachment to her – or anything else, for that matter. Taylor’s insistence that they return to her is at odds with his persistent nonchalance, and momentarily the serious intensity which he reserves for his car is turned towards her. Yet this is simply another one of Hellman’s curveballs, as Taylor tracks Bird down, only to watch on impassively as she slips away again, and the film ends. Lost, lonely, inarticulate and anonymous, Bird’s final exit goes unremarked upon by the film, or its characters, her bag of accumulated possessions left discarded in the parking lot as she rides away with the motorcyclist. The fact that the real Laurie Bird served as a prototype for the character of the girl, and subsequently committed suicide in 1979 after minor appearances in Hellman’s *Cockfighter* (New World Pictures, 1974) and *Annie Hall* (dir. Woody Allen, United Artists, 1977), suggests that the moments of distant sadness that she intermittently reveals throughout the film, may have been the most authentic to be captured by the film.

The characterisations in *Two-Lane Blacktop* continue the trend established in *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces* away from the Classical Hollywood imperative to establish consistent, simply drawn characters that inhabit and propel narrative action. The three films discussed so far in this chapter depart from the Classical model in different ways. Where *Easy Rider* suppressed its characterisations in the hope of offering universal (and ideologically ambiguous) points of identification, *Five Easy Pieces* withheld expository information in order to later reverse audience expectations. *Two-Lane Blacktop* challenges its audience by not only holding its characters at a psychologically-unreadable distance, but by having them act in puzzlingly contradictory ways throughout its duration. Thomas Elsaesser writes that in *Two-Lane Blacktop* “Hellman has made, and doubtless intended, an anti-action film, deliberately playing down an intrigue that might goad the spectator into involvement or a plot that could generate a psychologically motivated causal web of action and romance”.⁸¹ But Hellman’s film goes farther than merely representing inaction, as it very deliberately excises expected moments of action, and knowingly subverts the expectations of its viewer. It is a slow film about fast cars, a car race that is never finished, a love triangle populated by individuals who can barely rouse interest in one another, starring a pair of rock stars who never sing. The financial success of *Easy Rider* went hand in hand with the sales of its soundtrack album, a best-seller that provided a ready-made entry point to the film for its young, music-savvy audience, as well as providing a lucrative avenue of merchandising. As in the musical, the song sequences in *Easy Rider* occur as discrete, sectioned-off, non-causally related segments of visual pleasure for the spectator. In *Two-Lane Blacktop*, pop songs never dominate the soundtrack, playing out obscured beneath dialogue or car engines as they play on car radios or jukeboxes, never elevated to non-diegetic

⁸¹ Elsaesser, “The Pathos of Failure”, *The Last Great American Picture Show*, p. 281.

status. Although Wurlitzer and Hellman's song selections were often as hip as Hopper's (The Doors, Kris Kristofferson, Arlo Guthrie all feature), a soundtrack album was never issued, and no songs by Taylor or Wilson appear. The only character who does sing onscreen is Laurie Bird, who offers a tuneless rendition of the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction."

Like *Easy Rider*, *Two-Lane Blacktop* is ostensibly about characters on the road bound for a fixed destination. As existential dilemmas derail the expected narrative progression, by the end of both films, these journeys are demonstrated to be entirely arbitrary. Billy and Wyatt take to the road looking for some kind of abstract experience of lost American freedom, but the protagonists of *Two-Lane Blacktop* have no such lofty ambitions. Taylor and Wilson's characters have moved even further into the margins of society than Billy and Wyatt. While for the antiheroes of *Easy Rider*, the journey eastward is a definitive gesture severing ties with mainstream society, bankrolled by the proceeds of their drug deal, the driver and mechanic of *Two-Lane Blacktop* subsist self-sufficiently on North America's underground street-racing economy. Across the USA youths gather by night, congregating around fluorescent outposts of light in the wilderness to unspeakingly play their part in this subculture. Somehow Taylor and Wilson are sufficiently attuned to this pulse to hone in on it, and derive their income from it. The relationship the driver and mechanic share with this dispersed fraternity is similar to the uneasy standing between Billy, Wyatt and the hippies they encounter at the commune – the Chevy's driver and mechanic are perpetual outsiders, unable, due to the nature of their nomadic existence, to form even the most fleeting of relationships, as their interactions with the fellow members of the street-racing subculture vary from displays of bravado and competitive posturing to a kind of begrudging, and necessarily unspoken, solidarity.

Both *Easy Rider* and *Two-Lane Blacktop* represent the extreme end point on the spectrum of how Hollywood films might tell a story. *Easy Rider* begins with its characters at the logical end of the story, then wanders with them through a series of self-contained, stylistically discrete vignettes (from the lyrical photography of its motorcycle montages, to the self-conscious camera work of the commune sequence and Hopper's flash cutting, to the documentary-style parade and New Orleans sequences, and the avant-garde acid trip) as the story unravels around them. *Two-Lane Blacktop* employs cinematic style differently, never breaking the realistic mould of its storytelling style, while the events depicted self-consciously replicate the rhythms of real life, and refer in-absentia to the expectations generated through generic structures. Looking back at the film, Hellman says that, "what made *Two-Lane Blacktop* interesting for me was the fact that it didn't really have a story, it had just the barest bones of a story, and it became about day-to-day life, and there was no real change; it really ended the way it began, we just stopped..."⁸² Those expecting a generically-sanctioned ending for *Two-Lane Blacktop* would have been sorely disappointed. After offering a series of frustrations through the absence of expected generic and visual tropes - exciting car racing sequences, conspicuous exploitation of drug use, sexual activity, violence, rock music, lyrical landscapes - the film comes to a point where it is unable to end, but does so anyway. In its final shot, *Two-Lane Blacktop* for the first time breaks its realistic mould, and, in an overtly Godardian/Brechtian gesture, allows the film to burn in the projector, a device that had earlier been adopted at the conclusion of Rafelson's Monkees caper *Head*. How else to end a film which has excelled in quashing the expectations of its car-mad youth audience, by not only refusing to conclude the story, but also by halting the progress of the final car race in the film itself, further avoiding fulfilment of the most

⁸² Hellman, *You Can Never Go Fast Enough*.

straightforward of generic elements? Where Billy and Wyatt are dealt fiery onscreen deaths as the film around them attempts to account for their generic transgressions, in *Two-Lane Blacktop* Taylor's image is conflated with the artifice of the medium that has recorded his image, as the film itself, and his cinematic visage, incinerates. At the close of *Two-Lane Blacktop*, "the end of cinema" which Jean-Luc Godard had proclaimed with his *Week End* (Grove Press, 1967) finally makes its way to Hollywood. To end his studio film in such a self-consciously deconstructed manner was the final subversive yank of the chain from Hellman. But Universal would have the last laugh. When preparing prints of the film, the studio projectionist was so aghast at the sight of the frame dissolving, that he cut the final shot from the studio print.⁸³ For this reason, it is unclear as to whether or not Universal studio head Lew Wasserman ever saw the concluding sequence of the film. Nevertheless, he had seen enough to instil him with, "a deep-seated personal dislike for the film," and ensure that the road to release for *Two-Lane Blacktop* would not be an easy one, perhaps as revenge for Hellman's frequent clashes with the studio during production, over his insistence on shooting sequentially on location and his decision to use car audio over the Universal studio logo at the start of the film.

Upon release, *Two-Lane Blacktop* flew under the critical radar of the mainstream press, and where it did register, it often prompted an uncertain reception, although Oates was consistently singled out for praise, "steal[ing] what there is of the picture almost by default" in the words of Paul D. Zimmerman.⁸⁴ Zimmerman took issue with Hellman's low-key directorial style, stating that, "Hellman turns the voltage so low that one is tempted to take the film's pulse to see whether the projector is still rolling"; Elsewhere, Zimmerman criticised *Two-Lane Blacktop* for its derivativeness amidst the youth-cult cycle:

⁸³ Jones, "*Two-Lane Blacktop: Slow Ride*", p. 11.

⁸⁴ Zimmerman, p. 148.

The movie itself, however, is a modest effort - with much to be modest about. It is the ultimate *now* picture, a celluloid summary of every trend in current cinema - the well-traveled metaphor of the car race as a search for the self; the wandering hero cut loose from mainstream society; the concentration on the super-cool codes of the youth culture; the rock hero as movie star - in this case soft rocker James Taylor and Dennis Wilson of the Beach Boys; and the all too common critique of dominant American values like winning and striving.⁸⁵

Roger Ebert, in a tentatively positive review, concurred with Zimmerman's sentiments, stating that, "unless I missed the point, it doesn't have much of anything new to tell us".⁸⁶ *Time Magazine* went further, praising Hellman's attention to detail in a film that is,

immaculately crafted, funny and quite beautiful, resonant with a lingering mood of loss and loneliness. There are extended pauses and dialogue exchanges full of deliberate paradox. Few film makers have dealt so well or so subtly with the American landscape. Not a single frame in the film is wasted. Even the small touches—the languid tension while refuelling at a back-country gas station or the piercing sound of an ignition buzzer—have their own intricate worth.⁸⁷

The film commanded more attention from *Film Comment* than *Easy Rider* had, although only in the form of passing reference, and a negative one at that, some years

⁸⁵ Zimmerman, p. 184, emphasis in original.

⁸⁶ Roger Ebert, "Two-Lane Blacktop", *Chicago Sun-Times* (1971).

<<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19710101/REVIEWS/101010331/1023>>. (Accessed 30 November 2013).

⁸⁷ Jay Cocks (J.C.), "Cinema: Wheels: Hi Test", *Time* (12 July 1971), p. 50.

after its release: in his news column in 1974, Jonathan Rosenbaum reflected on *Two-Lane Blacktop* as “pretentious”.⁸⁸

Hellman’s film clearly engendered no sympathies at Universal when it failed at the box office. After its initial release it largely disappeared, receiving only one television airing in the 1980s, and never being released on video, due to the reluctance of the studio to clear music rights for distribution.⁸⁹ Ironically, this lengthy period of unavailability did not diminish the memory of the film, but rather enabled its legacy to grow, as it became something of a lost film of the 1970s. Its eventual laserdisc release in late 1990s was a deluxe affair, containing retrospective documentaries and commentary from Hellman. Its subsequent DVD releases, by Anchor Bay, Umbrella Entertainment and Criterion, were even more lavish.

Of all of the films discussed in this chapter, *Two-Lane Blacktop* now appears to be held in the most esteemed critical esteem. *Easy Rider* is often dismissed for having aged gracelessly, its impact more widely felt in the lexicon of pop-culture iconography than the annals of cinephiles. *Five Easy Pieces* is most fondly recalled for Nicholson’s performance, with Rafelson’s direction and Eastman’s screenplay commonly overlooked. *Two-Lane Blacktop*, on the other hand, is increasingly celebrated as a classic of the era, regularly screening at film retrospectives across the globe, and earning its own deluxe Criterion DVD release. Perhaps contemporary critics find their own satisfactions in filling in the gaps left in the ellipses of *Two-Lane Blacktop*, from its refusal to adhere to generic conventions, admiring its even, meditative pace and its documentary fidelity to a long-since-passed moment in both American and Hollywood geography. In 2011 I picked up a free fashion/youth culture

⁸⁸ Jonathan Rosenbaum, “Paris-London Journal”, *Film Comment*, Vol. 10, No. 6 (November/December 1974), pp. 4, 61. By 1996, Rosenbaum would reverse his position, stating that the film, “looks even better now than it did in 1971, though it was pretty interesting back then as well”. See Jonathan Rosenbaum, “*Two-Lane Blacktop*” (1 November 1996). <<http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/1996/11/two-lane-blacktop/>>. (Accessed 1 November 2014).

⁸⁹ Jones, “*Two-Lane Blacktop*: Slow Ride”, p. 11.

magazine from a local cafe. Entitled *Strangelove*, its cover was adorned with a publicity image from *Two-Lane Blacktop*.⁹⁰ Once the cultural product of yesteryear is trotted out to sell the fashions of today, its presence within the pop-culture unconsciousness is confirmed.

Where *Easy Rider*'s attempt to shoehorn existential aimlessness in with its mixture of exploitation cinema and avant garde affectation was considered half-cooked by some critics, Hellman's production methods on *Two-Lane Blacktop* instil the film with a stronger sense of authenticity. Hellman's film embraces ennui so completely that it becomes almost entirely a film without plot, as its characters are systematically stripped of motivation as their endless flight delivers them precisely nowhere. *Easy Rider* dipped its toes into the avant-garde, but continually turned away for safer, conservative Hollywood waters. *Two-Lane Blacktop* leaves us a compelling enigma, as the final reel becomes stuck in the gate of the projector, catches and burns, leaving future generations of critics and cinephiles to pick over the ashes.

⁹⁰ *Strangelove*, Issue 1 (Autumn 2011), (Surry Hills: Strangelove Press Australia, 2011).

PART III: *Vanishing Point*

By the time Universal released *Two-Lane Blacktop* in July of 1971, Twentieth Century Fox's film about a race against the clock cross-country car journey from Denver to San Francisco had already come and gone. Released in March of that year, *Vanishing Point* represents a counterpoint to Hellman's film. Both films undeniably occupy the same existentialist youth-cult road movie milieu that was carved out by *Easy Rider*, featuring grimly determined, coolly aloof non-communicative young men flippantly committing themselves to long-haul death trips doomed to failure from the outset. Both films deal in the same iconography (fast cars, lonely gas stations, lonelier drivers) and unfold before the same landscape (the unending scroll of North America's highway system). As well as their shared iconography and thematic similarity, both films were initially critical and box office failures, before the ensuing decades permitted a gradual process of legend-building, cult rehabilitation, and induction to the canon. Yet despite these similarities and shared points of origins, *Vanishing Point* and *Two-Lane Blacktop* are films that could never be mistaken for one another, so starkly opposed are their narrative modes and formal workings.

A closer look at *Vanishing Point* and the circumstances of its production broadens the picture we have of post-*Easy Rider* Hollywood, and of the effect that Hopper's earlier film had upon the studio mechanisms. *Vanishing Point*, in opposition to *Two-Lane Blacktop*, codifies the iconography and motifs of the post-*Easy Rider* youth-cult cycle into a more concrete and commercially-minded generic framework. The irony is that *Vanishing Point* never attained the financial success of its more difficult and ideologically slippery predecessor. The story of *Vanishing Point* confounds the conventional wisdom regarding the New Hollywood, and points to parallel narratives that were at play in Hollywood in 1971.

Like *Two-Lane Blacktop*, the series of events depicted in *Vanishing Point* look decidedly slender when put to paper. The film begins in the small town of Cisco, California where a roadblock is being assembled by police, an impenetrable barricade of interlocked bulldozer blades spanning the width of the roadway in anticipation of the arrival of the object of the pursuit - professional driver Kowalski (Barry Newman). As Kowalski roars down the highway towards the roadblock, the film freeze-frames and flashes back to two days earlier in Denver, Colorado. Kowalski is returning a car to his employer, and accepts a job to deliver a Dodge Challenger to San Francisco. Seemingly on a whim, Kowalski makes a bet with his drug dealer that he can deliver the car within fifteen hours – a wager verging on geographical and temporal impossibility. Shortly after his departure, Kowalski tangles with motorcycle police (again, seemingly arbitrarily), instigating a police chase which forms the basis of the film. The remainder of the movie follows Kowalski's attempts to evade the police, interrupted by occasional episodic encounters with other individuals on the road, usually when Kowalski has momentarily gained enough of a lead on his police pursuers to permit such interaction with the people he meets along his way. Kowalski encounters a wandering desert hermit played by Dean Jagger, a snake-worshipping, Gospel-singing religious cult, a newly married gay couple who attempt to rob him (and are depicted with a sneering homophobia that has not stood the test of time particularly well), a long-haired hippie motorcyclist that looks like a long-lost cast-off from *Easy Rider*, and a naked woman astride a motorcycle who, in another dated example of flimsy characterisations, instantly offers her sexual services to Kowalski upon their first meeting.⁹¹ These episodes are usually bookended by continuous sequences of car-chasing carnage as Kowalski races through police blockades and outruns a never-ending succession of pursuit cars. The film is also peppered with

⁹¹ Charlotte Rampling also appears in an excised scene that only appears in the alternate British cut of the film, as a dope-smoking harbinger of death encountered by Kowalski late in his journey.

occasional flashbacks to Kowalski's previous occupations, fleshing out some kind of psychological backstory for the character: we see Kowalski as motorcyclist and professional race driver, injured in a crash; Kowalski as police officer, preventing his superior's attempt to rape a young woman; Kowalski as surfer drop-out in love, and subsequently rattled by the death of his lover. Taken in sum, the purpose of these flashback sequences is to suggest the underlying reasons for Kowalski initiating his fatalistic doomed cross-country trip in the first place. A broken man with tragedy in his past and a healthy distaste for authority, Kowalski finds his life's culmination in this existential gesture, with his destruction predestined from the very first scene in the film.

Kowalski's progress is monitored by a blind small-town Nevadan disc jockey Supersoul (Cleavon Little), who uses the airwaves to communicate directly with Kowalski, who is strangely able to pick up Supersoul's incredibly broad-wave frequency no matter how many miles he traverses. Supersoul's impassioned coverage of Kowalski's flight is soon embraced by his countercultural listening audience, and longhaired types flock to the radio station in solidarity. Unfortunately, this swelling movement also catches the attention of local rednecks, who break their way into the radio station and attack the African-American disc jockey.⁹² Supersoul is subsequently coerced into misleadingly guiding Kowalski into a roadblock under the pretence that this route offers safe passage. Although he initially evades the first road block with the help of the hippie motorcyclist he has befriended, Kowalski returns, and accelerates directly into the dozer-blade barricade seen at the onset of the film, his car exploding into a fireball. The film ends as fire crews extinguish the flaming wreck of the car, and rubbernecking townsfolk assemble around the charred remains.

⁹² Cleavon Little's Supersoul is one of very few African American characters to appear in the predominantly white youth-cult road movie cycle. This scene in which he is attacked offers a pointed counterpoint to *Easy Rider*, in which such acts of racially-motivated violence are verbally invoked, but ultimately skirted around.

As with Randy Wurlitzer's (re)writing of *Two-Lane Blacktop*, *Vanishing Point*'s screenplay also emerged from a literary mind, being an early attempt at screenwriting by Cuban novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante, better known as his *nom-de-plume* G. Caín. Infante loosely based his pseudonymous screenplay (written as Guillermo Cain) on two factual incidents: the career of a disgraced San Diego police officer and returned serviceman, and the story of a police chase in California in which the target refused to stop at a roadblock and died in the ensuing collision.⁹³

Like many other filmmakers who came to prominence in the New Hollywood moment (among them Bob Rafelson, Robert Altman and William Friedkin) by bypassing the traditional ascent through studio ranks, instead cutting their teeth in television before transitioning laterally to studio direction, Richard C. Sarafian accumulated early directorial credits on such shows as *I Spy* (NBC, 1966, 68), *Batman* (ABC, 1966), *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1963) and the western serials *Maverick* (ABC, 1961), *Lawman* (ABC, 1961-62), *The Big Valley* (ABC, 1965), *The Wild Wild West* (CBS, 1965) and *Gunsmoke* (CBS, 1965, 67, 68). Sarafian made his debut feature *Run Wild, Run Free* (Columbia Pictures, 1969), having earlier turned down the Olympic ski drama *Downhill Racer*, which would be released later in the same year starring Robert Redford and Gene Hackman under the direction of Michael Ritchie, for Paramount.⁹⁴

⁹³ Paul Zazarine, "Kowalski's Last Ride", *Muscle Car Review* (March 1986).

<<http://www.fortunecity.com/silverstone/chrysler/426/movie.html>>. (Accessed 30 May 2011).

⁹⁴ Michael Ritchie is a director with an intriguing career trajectory in his own right. Like Sarafian, Ritchie made inroads through television, before making his feature film directorial debut with *Downhill Racer*, and two notable subsequent films: the Robert Redford-starring political satire *The Candidate* (Warner Bros., 1972), and the hard-nosed, now forgotten gangster picture *Prime Cut* (National General Pictures, 1974), which locates its nexus of bloody criminal activity in and around the wheat fields and slaughterhouses of Kansas. This latter film featured the memorable pairing of Lee Marvin and Gene Hackman, along with the screen debut of Sissy Spacek. Ritchie's later baseball caper *The Bad News Bears* (Paramount Pictures, 1976), proved to be a box-office success, as was his spiritual successor to *The Longest Yard* (dir. Robert Aldrich, Paramount Pictures, 1974), the Burt Reynolds football movie *Semi-Tough* (United Artists, 1977). The success of these two films appeared to cast Ritchie as a specialist director of comedic romps, as the remainder of his curriculum vitae is filled out with such titles as the Chevy Chase vehicles *Fletch* (Universal Pictures, 1985), *Fletch Lives* (Universal Pictures, 1989) and *Cops and Robbers* (TriStar, 1994), the Eddy Murphy blockbuster

Twentieth Century Fox president Richard D. “Dick” Zanuck (the son of former Fox studio head Darryl F. Zanuck and actress Virginia Fox) took a personal interest in the overseeing the production of *Vanishing Point*, which became something of a pet project for the studio executive. In an auspicious instance of studio-decreed product placement, the presence of the white 1970 Dodge Challenger was contractually engineered by Zanuck and the Chrysler motor company, who supplied the vehicles for a fee of one dollar a day.⁹⁵ In fact, according to Sarafian, the inclusion of the Dodge Challenger in the film represented Zanuck’s “main interest” in the project.⁹⁶ This statement must be taken with a grain of salt, given that *Vanishing Point* is a film around which “numerous myths have developed,” a situation which, while hardly unique to Sarafian’s film alone, is compounded by the relative paucity of writings concerning the film to date, and the often-contradictory statements arising from interviews with key collaborators.⁹⁷ For example, while Sarafian says that the Challenger was included as a result of a pre-ordained deal between Zanuck and the car company, *Vanishing Point* stunt coordinator Carey Loftin, in a 1986 interview with *Muscle Car Review* magazine, says that he personally selected the Challenger for the film due to the “quality of the torsion bar suspension and for its horsepower,” an account which obviously contradicts Sarafian’s.⁹⁸ In the same interview, Loftin also states that the vehicle company supplied the production with five Challenger vehicles, whereas Sarafian places the number at eight in his DVD commentary. While this relatively minor discrepancy of figures can be attributed to the vagaries of memory wandering back over the decades, it nevertheless calls into question the veracity of other conflicting statements made regarding *Vanishing Point*. In Sarafian’s

The Golden Child (Paramount Pictures, 1986), and the made-for-TV mockumentary *The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom* (HBO, 1993).

⁹⁵ Richard C. Sarafian, audio commentary, *Vanishing Point* DVD, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Zazarine.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

commentary on the *Vanishing Point* DVD, the director comes across on the one hand as a genuine and humble individual as he addresses his own admittedly rocky career in a candid light, and appears to legitimately relish the opportunity to discuss *Vanishing Point* (“I was so fortunate to have this experience, and being able to talk about it thirty years later is a treat. I’ve got tears in my eyes”).⁹⁹ On the other hand, Sarafian appears to be something of an exaggerator and raconteur as he recounts some anecdotes that frankly beggar belief, such as the tale of a prostitute called Misty whom “the crew had sort of saved from a local hook joint, and was travelling with the crew”, only to abscond with the only remaining Challenger, instigating a chase involving a police helicopter before the car was later returned.¹⁰⁰ Uncertainties aside, what is clear is that the Dodge Challengers were accommodatingly provided to Twentieth Century Fox by the vehicle company in a mutually beneficial cross-promotional venture. In this regard, *Vanishing Point* extends *Easy Rider*’s centrality of the vehicle into the commercial realm, as a film set in and around a single vehicle becomes tied, at the earliest stages of preproduction, to the promotion of the mechanical prowess and commodification of that particular vehicle. For Zanuck, and for Chrysler, *Vanishing Point* begins with the Challenger, a desirable, and readily identifiable, promotional avenue. While both *Easy Rider* and *The Graduate* suggested merchandising pathways for tie-in soundtrack albums, from the earliest stages of its existence, *Vanishing Point*’s fortunes were tied to its ability to sell Chrysler’s vehicle.

Like the thematically similar films that preceded and coincided with it, *Vanishing Point* adopted another lesson from *Easy Rider*, employing a similarly flexible, mobile mode of production and location shooting. Like Hopper, Sarafian fully utilised the advances in technology that were becoming available to the Hollywood industry in the early 1970s. Smaller, portable cameras and sound

⁹⁹ Sarafian, audio commentary.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

recorders, and faster film stocks meant that smaller crews could be used, and could venture beyond the confines of the studio. This was certainly the case with *Vanishing Point*, which employed only one studio location, for the police control room seen at the end of the film, as the authorities monitor Kowalski's incursion into California. The remainder of the film was shot within real-world locations, following the actual geographical route taken by Kowalski in the film - a similarity shared with both *Easy Rider* and *Two-Lane Blacktop*. The advantage of using such a small number of locations, and limiting much of the action to exterior and interior shots of Kowalski's car, meant that the production required only a small crew, although a more elaborate scale of production could barely have been permitted given the project's \$US1.3 million budget (still significantly larger than \$US 850 000 bottom line for *Two-Lane Blacktop*). Sarafian puts that budgetary figure in context when he recounts that *Vanishing Point* was produced by Fox only a year after such projects as *Hello, Dolly!* (dir. Gene Kelly, 1969, \$US 25 million budget), and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (dir. Richard Fleischer, Toshio Masuda, Kinji Fukasaku, 1970, \$US 25 million budget), elaborate mega-productions which make the conditions of *Vanishing Point*'s production look "almost like a hobby" by comparison.¹⁰¹ The production manager on *Vanishing Point*, Francisco Day, had just finished work on *Patton* (dir. Franklin J. Schaffner, Twentieth Century Fox, 1970), and was shocked to find himself a member of Sarafian's crew of "nineteen members, where everybody pitched in, and picked up a broom and swept the set." This egalitarian scenario typifies the rarefied atmosphere of open collaboration that is often remarked upon in idealised remembrances of the New Hollywood period.¹⁰² Furthermore, the fact that *Vanishing Point* eschews the globetrotting theatre of war of *Tora! Tora! Tora!* or the sweeping musical gestures of *Hello, Dolly!*, instead restricting its focus to Kowalski's drive across North America,

¹⁰¹ Sarafian, audio commentary.

¹⁰² Ibid.

points to a reduction of scale that again typifies the concerns of the New Hollywood film, even one as commercially-minded and generically coherent as *Vanishing Point*, primarily intended to sell a car.

As with the other films discussed in this chapter, this small-scale, mobile mode of production results in certain aesthetic characteristics that typify the films of that period. The use of real-world locations lends a lived-in sense of authenticity; like *Two-Lane Blacktop*, the careful, pseudo-documentary eye that Sarafian and cinematographer John A. Alonzo turn towards the locations they employed, now lend the film something of a time-capsule quality. Sarafian says that it was not unusual for the production to “travel sometimes as much as 400 miles in one day, onto a spot that I thought would be visually interesting,” a luxury afforded to many directors helming projects in the wake of the post-*Easy Rider* production boom, and working in ways that would never have been sanctioned at studio level were it not for the unexpected box-office success of Hopper’s film.¹⁰³

The opening sequence of *Vanishing Point* employs many of the stylistic techniques that can also be observed at work in *Easy Rider* and *Two-Lane Blacktop*. *Vanishing Point* begins with a wide shot of an empty stretch of highway. A derelict-looking service station is regarded through a very slow panning and tracking movement (**Fig 2.1**). The yellow and red Shell sign is the only splash of colour amidst the drab, detritus-strewn wasteland, and the camera movement gradually reveals a distant mountain range upon the horizon, and seemingly abandoned town buildings (**Fig 2.2**) before, finally, the camera comes to gaze directly down the highway. In the glare of morning light, the gentle flapping of a flag is the only on-screen movement until a police motorcycle appears from a distant point on the horizon, and heads directly towards the camera. This sequence immediately evokes many of the features

¹⁰³ Sarafian, audio commentary.

of the 1971 road movie: a self-conscious manipulation of cinematic space and time that draws attention to both the conspicuous emptiness of the frame, and the inexorable passage of real time, the extended stillness disjointed by the incursion of the police motorcycle. Similar plays with duration and inactivity can be observed amidst the stylistic self-consciousness and narrative misdirections of *Easy Rider*, *Five Easy Pieces* and *Two-Lane Blacktop*. As well as being something of a narrative non-sequitur consistent with the generic obfuscation that abounds within the youth-cult road movie cycle, the shot that opens *Vanishing Point* also quickly establishes the themes that will occupy the film: the Shell service station, a beacon of urbanity conspicuously adrift in the unforgiving desert terrain, evokes the dislocation of city-dweller Kowalski, a character whose very name, is, according to John Beck, “likely to suggest an urban immigrant identity out of its element in the open spaces of the West”.¹⁰⁴ The shabby and abandoned-looking houses foreshadow the desert-dwelling individuals Kowalski will come to rely upon in order to traverse this alien environment.



Fig 2.1



Fig 2.2

Other elements of this opening sequence can be placed neatly alongside signature stylistic elements of *Vanishing Point*'s youth-cult contemporaries. The second shot of Sarafian's film is a low-angle shot of two backlit earth-movers lumbering down the highway, leaving a trail of dust behind them that is disturbed by

¹⁰⁴ John Beck, “Resistance Becomes Ballistic: *Vanishing Point* and the end of the road”, *Cultural Politics*, Vol. 3, Issue 1 (March 2007), p. 42.

a speeding police motorcycle that races between the two bulldozers. Shot with a wide-angle lens that distorts the camera's perspective, the shot is framed in such a way that asphalt fills the lower half of the frame, visible in such detail that individual pieces of gravel can be perceived (**Fig 2.3**). In its ability to find aesthetic value in an unexpected source, and in its use of an unusual camera angle that momentarily disorients the viewer, this shot recalls the similarly disorienting shot of a front-end loader at the start of *Five Easy Pieces* (**Fig 2.4**). *Vanishing Point*'s third shot is even more disorienting, as the film cuts to a weathered home, the road reflected in the window. It is not until the reflection of the earthmover moves across the window that its relevance to the preceding shot becomes clear, and even then, the spatial relationship of the shots remains obscure. The rest of the sequence continues in this vein, evoking an unusual lyrical quality through expressive cinematography: an underexposed shot looks out through an abandoned shopfront, as a silhouette replete with cowboy-hat stands backlit in the window by the natural light as the bulldozers dustily make their way past. As with the New Orleans sequence of *Easy Rider*, the oilfield scenes of *Five Easy Pieces* and the drag race meet in *Two-Lane Blacktop*, *Vanishing Point*'s opening sequence employs a pseudo-documentary sense of montage, intercutting documentary-style handheld cutaways with close-ups of the bulldozers and appearances by the actual residents of the small town. The decision to shoot in the small town of Cisco, California, well on its way to becoming a ghost town, adds to the documentary/newsreel quality that appears in the stretches of *Vanishing Point* that engage most convincingly with their real world locations. According to Sarafian, his crew happened upon near derelict Cisco, which he describes as a, "town that's now vacant, or was vacant at that time, because the railroad was built about a mile or so away, and a super-highway alongside it".¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Sarafian, audio commentary.



Fig 2.3



Fig 2.4

What remains unclear throughout the opening sequence of *Vanishing Point* is precisely why these events are happening. This question is wryly acknowledged with the first line of dialogue in the film, “wonder what’s going on here? Here comes CBS news, must be important.” These languorous moments of inaction and narrative misdirection, evocative as they are, are ultimately misleading as to the nature of *Vanishing Point*, and represent an inaugural “fakeout” on behalf of Mr Sarafian, akin to the trickery of Rafelson and Hellman. Within its opening minutes, *Vanishing Point* cuts away to a fast-moving, low flying helicopter, and Kowalski’s speeding Dodge Challenger. From this point onwards, the action does not relent for the next half hour, as Kowalski’s initiation and subsequent attempts to evade police pursuit are documented in procedural detail.

More than any other film of the post-*Easy Rider* youth-cult road movie cycle, *Vanishing Point* is primarily concerned with the evocation of the sense of speed. To that end, Sarafian stages precisely the kind of rapidly edited, spatially-coherent chase sequences, replete with unusual camera angles and roaring soundtrack, that Hellman pointedly eschews when observing the velocity of his protagonists from a detached, fixed perspective. *Vanishing Point* freely juxtaposes shots of Kowalski’s car and its interior with those of his pursuers, and regards its action from a multitude of shifting perspectives as cars race down highways, leap over embankments, tumble into ditches, and explode in fireballs. Despite moments of shared aesthetic sensibilities,

when it comes to representing vehicular action, *Two-Lane Blacktop* could not be more dissimilar to Sarafian's film.

Nevertheless, just as *Two-Lane Blacktop* invokes the generic expectations of the youth-cult road movie cycle before quietly subverting them, in its own way, *Vanishing Point* may be taken more broadly as an inversion of the action film genre. Certainly Sarafian's film is equally subversive, albeit in very different ways. Films in the action genre typically offer viewers what Gunning refers to as a cinema of attractions, luring viewers with an unspoken contract promising exciting action set pieces organised around a causally-motivated chain of narrative events. *Vanishing Point* employs all of the formal machinery and stylistic characteristic of the action genre in its depiction of high speed car chases, yet its conventionally-represented action setpieces are couched within a storyline that is perfunctory to the point of abstraction. Kowalski instigates the chase for reasons that are never explained, nor dwelled upon, jousting with motorcycle police officers with no regard for the legal consequences. Whether his actions are motivated by an aloof antiauthoritarian streak or a doomed sense of existential dread, the film offers no clear-cut psychological explanations. In fact, the flashback revealing Kowalski's own personal history as a disenfranchised former police officer complicates rather than clarifies his standing in relation to the lawmen with whom he tangles. Does a sense of solidarity remain to ensure that no serious harm befalls his pursuers (as, indeed, despite the many high-speed accidents, no police officer is ever seriously harmed in *Vanishing Point*), or did the circumstances under which he left the police force leave Kowalski with such a bitter sense of antiauthoritarianism that he cannot help but direct his car at the first police motorcycles he encounters on the road?

At any rate, *Vanishing Point* is based upon the flimsiest of premises: speed for the sake of speed alone. Kowalski is driven to always drive faster. The authorities,

accordingly, must play their role and attempt to punish him for doing so, the increasingly ludicrous scale of their effort to arrest his passage the only logical response to Kowalski's insistent "dangerous driving and failure to stop" in the absence of motivation or provocation. Even attempting to apply significance to Kowalski's actions is potentially frivolous; as Beck comments, "Kowalski is not intentionally running from the police but is merely going faster than they are".¹⁰⁶

Unlike *Two-Lane Blacktop*, which positioned itself as a generic entity only to consciously veer away from fulfilling the generic expectations, *Vanishing Point* offers precisely what is expected of it – automotive thrills – and little besides that. The episodic nature of the film, as Kowalski occasionally retreats from the freeway to interact with the denizens of the desert, bears very little resemblance to earlier such episodic, madcap vehicular capers *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad, World* (dir. Stanley Kramer, United Artists, 1963) and *The Great Race*, (the former of which also featured the talents of *Vanishing Point* stunt driver Carey Loftin). Instead, *Vanishing Point* dispenses with the whimsy of those earlier films to recall instead the lean efficiency of the car chase sequence from *Bullitt*, stretched here to feature length as an eerily empty formal evocation of speed itself. Its endless car chases and crashes play out with the minimum of narrative context, meaning that entire action sequences play as exercises in how to stage a car chase, and are no less visually arresting as such. When Kowalski veers off the road and interacts with the inhabitants of the wasteland the film becomes hamstrung by weak performances and dialogue. The very flimsiness of these characterisations and their depictions only strengthens, by dint of comparison, the visceral excitement of Sarafian's expertly staged chase sequences.

This is one important point of difference between *Vanishing Point* and *Two-Lane Blacktop*. Hellman's film never bothers to spend much time in the places it

¹⁰⁶ Beck, p.42.

passes through, its characters preferring constant motion, and the supporting cast is primarily filled out by similarly itinerant hitch hikers. Hellman's monosyllabic (anti)heroes only emerged from the speed bubble of their Chevy to transact – for food, for car parts and to set up races. Kowalski, on the other hand, does interact with the people he comes across in their native environments, and finds the spaces of rural America to be in a state of decay, a decrepit hiding place for hermits, religious cults, racists and marginalised exiles from mainstream society, including hippies and homosexuals. Needless to say, Kowalski never once comes across the decent, salt-of-the-earth folk that transfixed Billy and Wyatt in *Easy Rider*, as *Vanishing Point* “refuses the escapism of the road movie genre and instead pursues the logic of maximum efficiency internalized by the film's protagonist”.¹⁰⁷

People of the desert assist Kowalski, with Dean Jagger's hermit shielding him from a police helicopter and directing him back to the freeway, while Timothy Scott's hippie helps him to evade a police roadblock, but they may as well be operating on different planes of existence to him. Their lives are defined within the closed circles of their localities, and Kowalski's by the lethal pursuit of perpetual motion. Beck notes a fundamental schism at play here, both stylistically and narratively, as the relentless action of Kowalski's on-road activities are “punctuated by ponderous stretches of desert stillness”.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, Beck sees a relationship between “this temporal modulation,” and, “Kowalski's periodic intake of amphetamines,” resulting in a “formal resistance to generic real time”.¹⁰⁹

Following Beck's line of reasoning that Kowalski's occasional detours off-road into the tepid company of barely-realised caricatures represents a literalisation of the speed-freak's lull between fixes, *Vanishing Point* offers an intriguing counterpoint to *Easy Rider*'s structural tendencies. Where Hopper consistently emulates the

¹⁰⁷ Beck, p.36

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p.45.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

fractured and kaleidoscopic experience of an acid trip, Sarafian conjures the frenzied desire for more speed - both automotively and chemically, leaving the viewer with a craving for more high speed action whenever Kowalski departs from the chase to do far less interesting things.

The ideologically mismatched marriage of classically-depicted action sequences to incoherent narrative means that the rare moments of inaction that pepper *Vanishing Point* are unable to engender the zen sense of calm that permeates Hellman's studiously one-note *Two-Lane Blacktop*. The war between form and content in *Vanishing Point* is both testament to, and rebuke of Elsaesser's claim that the New Hollywood was predicated upon a "fading confidence in the ability to tell a story".¹¹⁰ *Vanishing Point* is expertly told, and full of sound and fury, yet signifies nothing, at least insofar as the events it depicts are entirely unmotivated, without cause, and ultimately to no end. In this way, *Vanishing Point* departs from the Bordwell/Staiger/Thompson model of narrative centrality, instead foregrounding vehicular action as organising narrative principle, much like *Easy Rider*. Sarafian picks and chooses interesting elements of the youth-cult road movie cycle, adopting the existential sense of aimlessness and liminal settings of the earlier films, but situating them within a conventionally shot action narrative. Like Billy and Wyatt, Kowalski flouts conventional cinematic morality. Like *Easy Rider*, *Vanishing Point* backs itself into a narrative corner, and Sarafian and Infante end their film with that most galvanising of New Hollywood gestures, the resigned acquiescence to the downbeat, the fatal. *Vanishing Point* is a film most explicitly about suicide. Kowalski, defeated from the outset, pursued by the police across multiple states for no reason in particular, has only speed, and ultimately death awaits at the end of the road. Beck

¹¹⁰ Elsaesser, 'The Pathos of Failure', *The Last Great American Picture Show*, p. 280.

writes of the fireball that concludes the film, as Kowalski sends his Challenger careering into the dozer blades, that:

Kowalski's crash, accompanied by the quixotic smirk we are offered in the moment before impact, is ecstatically final as the driver merges with the terminal velocity of the machine. *Vanishing Point* appears to be less about an imagined lost freedom (the Western topos) and much more concerned with the annihilation of the individual by the logic of acceleration.¹¹¹

Vanishing Point is haunted by the same air of fatalism and failure that pervades *Easy Rider*, *Five Easy Pieces* and *Two-Lane Blacktop*. The endings of all four films resound with the same note of defeat, but *Vanishing Point* alone joins *Easy Rider* in killing its protagonist. Whilst *Two-Lane Blacktop* finishes with the destruction of the film print itself, it also finds Taylor and Wilson stuck in a loop, much like Bobby Dupea, continuing to criss-cross the country. Admittedly, the incineration that concludes *Two-Lane Blacktop* represents a metaphorical death of sorts, while as other writers have noted, Bobby Dupea may well be travelling to his demise at the close of *Five Easy Pieces*. *Easy Rider* puts Billy and Wyatt to death at the hands of others, their martyrdom pre-ordained from the start of the film given their transgressions of Hollywood's inherent moral code. Kowalski's end comes as abruptly as those of Billy and Wyatt, and is, if anything, even more jarring for the audience than the final scene of Hopper's film. The apocalyptic fireball which engulfs Kowalski's car as it collides with the roadblock is a disturbingly unexpected termination of the arc of the cult of the outsider spawned from *Easy Rider*. Sarafian employs another "fakeout" in the scenes leading up to Kowalski's death. Up until this point, the cinematic style of *Vanishing Point* has indicated that Kowalski is heading for a moment of triumph, from the uplifting soul music on the soundtrack, to the rapid cross-cutting from

¹¹¹ Beck, p. 42.

Kowalski's determined facial expression to the seemingly-insurmountable roadblock that looms. Throughout the film, *Vanishing Point* has employed the tropes and conventions of the action film genre. Despite its slender storyline, it nevertheless holds the attention of its audience by piling seemingly insurmountable odds against Kowalski, while nevertheless retaining the generic expectations that Kowalski will elude his pursuers and successfully deliver the Dodge Challenger. Such optimistic expectations are bolstered by its adherence to the conventional stylistic modes of the action genre, suggesting a generically-sanctioned triumphant conclusion, a notion that ultimately proves incompatible with the trappings of the youth-cult cycle. As Kowalski approaches the final roadblock, logic dictates that there is no way that he can avoid the obstacle, but the insistent soundtrack and pace of the editing insist that an unexpected surprise looms. This surprise is the instantaneous death of Kowalski, as the upbeat, non-diegetic music immediately silences at the moment of impact, leaving only Kowalski's "car welded... to the blades" of the bulldozer, recalling, in Sarafian's eloquent reckoning, "a bent penis".¹¹² Is any triumph to be found in this gesture? Kowalski's death effects no change, and offers no meaningful significance. If any light is to be found at the end of Sarafian's film, it is in the recourse to the wonder and magnitude of the natural environment, as evoked by John A. Alonzo's cinematography, whose wide shot compositions take in shifting deserts, towering rock formations, and the scorched, bone-dry majesty of the wasteland, summoning the "vast sweep of America".¹¹³ Alonzo, a former television western actor, was still honing his craft as a cinematographer on *Vanishing Point*, having shot a number of television documentaries and briefly been mentored by James Wong Howe. Alonzo would subsequently go on to combine his penchant for handheld, documentary-style camerawork, sun-drenched locales and gloomy interiors on *Chinatown* (dir. Roman

¹¹² Sarafian, audio commentary.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Polanski, Paramount Pictures, 1974). *Easy Rider* concludes as the camera pulls away from the flaming wreckage of Wyatt's motorcycle, which is soon lost by the retreating helicopter shot amidst the greenery of the landscape as Roger McGuinn sings, "flow, river, flow, let your waters wash down, take me from this road, to some other town." Life, too, goes on in *Vanishing Point* after the death of Kowalski, as the film continues while the credits roll, the inhabitants of the town gathering around the wreckage of Kowalski's car as lens flares appear in the sky.

Kowalski, nevertheless, is dead, and the problem remains of how to read the ending of the film. Despite Supersoul's attempt to rally a countercultural movement around Kowalski's gestures of refusal, Kowalski's rebellion never really carries a seditious dimension. All evidence within the film indicates that Kowalski flees the police merely for the sake of it. Like Billy and Wyatt, Kowalski spurns opportunities to join in solidarity with the countercultural types that cross his path. He wears plain clothing that betrays no hint of any subcultural affiliation: jeans and a plain, button-up long-sleeved shirt, the same nondescript uniform donned by James Taylor and Dennis Wilson in *Two-Lane Blacktop*. The flashbacks that pepper *Vanishing Point* suggest that "Kowalski's outsider status is far from willed," and the character is anything but an anti-establishment type, being a decorated returned serviceman, and former police officer.¹¹⁴ Beck views Kowalski "as the everyman of postwar American youth culture".¹¹⁵ In light of the character's fairly extensive biography prior to the events of *Vanishing Point*, the casting of the young, relatively anonymous Barry Newman as the Kowalski seems an unusual choice, considering that an older, more established screen presence may have lent more credibility and authority to the role. In fact, the casting of the relatively inexperienced Newman, who at that point had only one starring credit to his name, for British director Sidney J. Furie's *The Lawyer*

¹¹⁴ Beck, p. 44.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p. 47.

(Paramount Pictures, 1970), was another production pre-requisite insisted upon by Dick Zanuck, who envisioned Newman as a future star.¹¹⁶ Sarafian originally wanted to cast Gene Hackman in the Kowalski role, and Hackman was interested, but his involvement was forbidden by the studio in order to make way for Newman, and Hackman went on to star in *The French Connection* for Fox in the same year. Sarafian believed that the film needed a lead actor who “appeared to be the adult male, [who] fit behind the wheel of the car” and when Zanuck insisted on Newman, Sarafian decided that he was going to “make the car the star”.¹¹⁷ Sarafian’s original preference for Hackman would have further removed *Vanishing Point* from the youth cult cycle, emphasising Kowalski’s status as a grizzled, marginalised former-establishment man, as much Harry Callahan or Popeye Doyle as Billy or Wyatt. Sarafian also considered George C. Scott for the part.¹¹⁸ Scott ended up starring in *The Last Run* (dir. Richard Fleischer, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1971), which uncannily resembles *Vanishing Point*, with Scott’s retired gangster Harry Garmes an analogue of Kowalski, similarly drawn back into one final, fatal driving job, this time from France to Portugal. *The Last Run* is a parallel reworking of *Vanishing Point*’s themes and narrative arc, stripping away the youth-cult accoutrements and American setting in favour of continental Europe, and a grizzled, hard-nosed generic mode. Nevertheless, the downbeat ending of *The Last Run*, concluding with Scott’s death, suggests that *Easy Rider*’s narrative influence was extending beyond the parameters of the youth-cult cycle. Fleischer’s film simultaneously harks back to the equally terminal conclusions that were a hallmark of the film-noir, another generically-discrete film cycle which, filtered through the French New Wave, had been on the fringes of New Hollywood consciousness since Arthur Penn’s before-its-time *Mickey*

¹¹⁶ Sidney J. Furie had also directed films that qualify under the youth-cult road movie banner, namely the prototypical, British *The Leather Boys* (Allied Artists Pictures, 1964), and *Little Fauss and Big Halsy*.

¹¹⁷ Sarafian, audio commentary.

¹¹⁸ Mark Williams, *Road Movies* (New York; London: Proteus Books, 1982), p. 116.

One (dir. Arthur Penn, Columbia Pictures, 1965). These tendencies would emerge more overtly in the coming years in the form of *The Conversation*, *Chinatown* and *The Parallax View* (dir. Alan J. Pakula, Paramount Pictures, 1974). *The Last Run*, in its narrative resemblance to *Vanishing Point*, gives an idea of what the latter film may have been like had Zanuck granted Sarafian's wish to cast Scott (or Hackman). It is not difficult to imagine the kind of dramatic weight that Scott or Hackman would have brought to the Kowalski role, such was the stature of their respective screen presences. The near-unknown Newman, an astral waif when considered alongside heavyweights of Scott and Hackman's stature, nevertheless brings his own sense of transience, of nondescript mutability to the role. Ultimately, Zanuck's resolute insistence on casting the of Newman shaped the film in ways the studio head could not have predicted, even as it precluded the wider audience appeal that may have accompanied the charismatic intensity of Hackman or Scott. How could Zanuck have known that Newman's star would not rise, as Hackman's would on the basis of his pugnacious turn as Popeye Doyle?

This is one of many decisions made by Zanuck which may have ultimately diminished the commercial viability of *Vanishing Point*. Another such ill-fated choice related to the film's soundtrack. Sarafian initially edited the film to a temporary soundtrack from the album "Motel Shot" by Delaney & Bonney and Friends, a stark, predominantly acoustic album that featured Gram Parsons, the Byrds affiliate who was swimming in the same talent pool Hopper drew on with *Easy Rider*. Unfortunately, the music from "Motel Shot" was vetoed for inclusion by Zanuck and Fox music department supervisor Lionel Newman, on the basis that the rights for that album were not owned by the Twentieth Century Fox stable, and the studio did not wish to pay a rival publishing firm. Lionel Newman also rejected Sarafian's attempt to include music by the music supervisor's then-fledgling nephew Randy. Instead,

Zanuck and Newman showed a working-print to emerging artists, and commissioned them to write songs inspired by the film. These groups included Doug Dillard Expedition, Mountain, Longbranch Pennywhistle and Kim Carnes, names that have not endured like the names featured on the *Easy Rider* soundtrack. Hopper's song selections were perfectly timed, drawing on American rock music's melding of the pastoral with the psychedelic, a pitch-perfect fit for *Easy Rider*'s wandering narrative, not to mention attracting more cinemagoers to the film, and boosting the auxiliary market for soundtrack LP sales. Sarafian's film, on the other hand, is soundtracked by the fundamentally urban sounds of soul and gospel music, which are an odd match for the rural setting of *Vanishing Point*, and sit uneasily alongside many of the chase sequences.

In a telling indication of a lack of studio confidence in the completed film, the ensuing soundtrack album was mismarketed and poorly distributed, denying the possibility for additional sources of revenue for the film. Between the shooting of *Vanishing Point* and its eventual cinematic release, Zanuck was deposed as studio head at Fox, and his replacement, Dennis Carothers Stanfill, showed no favour towards his predecessor's pet project. Sarafian says that under Stanfill, Fox "didn't see the potential for the soundtrack. I don't think they saw the potential for the movie. I think they just wanted to put it back on the shelf and then get on with the new stuff that... the new head of studio wanted to make".¹¹⁹ Barry Newman recalls that "Twentieth Century [Fox] had no faith in the movie" and that the studio "dumped the film in neighbourhood theatres as a multiple release, and it was out of the theatres in less than two weeks".¹²⁰ Initial notices for *Vanishing Point* in the United States were not positive either, with Roger Greenspun in the *New York Times* naming it "a movie

¹¹⁹ Sarafian, audio commentary.

¹²⁰ Zazarine.

about which I can think of almost nothing good to say”.¹²¹ Nonetheless, positive reception in the United Kingdom and Europe prompted a re-release in the United States on a double-bill during the first run of *The French Connection* in October of 1971.¹²²

Since then, the status and legacy of *Vanishing Point* has grown, its influence continuing to be felt in areas as diverse as the Burt Reynolds vehicles *White Lightning* (dir. Joseph Sargent, United Artists, 1973), *Smokey and the Bandit* (dir. Hal Needham, Universal Pictures, 1977) and *The Cannonball Run* (dir. Hal Needham, Twentieth Century Fox, 1981) to *Death Proof* (dir. Quentin Tarantino, Dimension Films, 2007). Television screenings in the mid-1970s and an eventual video release facilitated the growth of a cult audience for *Vanishing Point*. British indie band Primal Scream borrowed the title of the film for their 1997 concept album, conceived as an alternate soundtrack to the film, and US group Audioslave released a music video in 2004 comprised of excerpts from the film. The following year, restored prints of both *Vanishing Point* and *Two-Lane Blacktop* were screened at the Cannes Film Festival.

If the reappraisal of *Vanishing Point* has not quite yet elevated the film to the status now enjoyed by *Two-Lane Blacktop*, the legacy of Sarafian’s film still appears to be healthily on the rise. A search of the online research database Pro Quest for “*Vanishing Point*” paired with “Sarafian” turns up thirty one publication reference from 1970-79, twenty six records from 1980-89, thirty three records from 1990-99, sixty seven records from 2000-2009, and already forty five records from the years 2010-14. This trend suggests that there is more interest in the film now than in its

¹²¹ Roger Greenspun, “*Vanishing Point*: A Lot of Speed and Loads of Hair”, *New York Times* (25 March 1971).
<<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B0CEEDA1530E73BBC4D51DFB566838A669EDE&partner=Rotten%20Tomatoes>>. (Accessed 3 June 2011).

¹²² Zazarine.

period of release, and that this interest is on the incline. Like *Two-Lane Blacktop*, *Vanishing Point* is available in a deluxe DVD release.

Vanishing Point's ultimate legacy is in its reworking of the *Easy Rider* youth-cult iconography and production methodology into a commercial action movie formula. The use of mobile, pseudo-documentary location shooting, and prominent use of an alienated male protagonist recall Hopper's film, while Sarafian's capable direction of action chase sequences contrasts starkly with the unhurried aesthetic modes of Rafelson and Hellman. By the end of the film, Sarafian is unable to resolve the tension between these two conflicting narrative and stylistic modes, and ultimately *Vanishing Point* concludes with a grab from the *Easy Rider* playbook, adopting the youth-cult approved protagonist death.

Two-Lane Blacktop had eradicated its own box-office viability. The lack of studio supervision over the production enabled Hellman to employ such unconventional (by Hollywood standards) aesthetic and production practices that, despite positive pre-release buzz, the final film nonplussed audiences and critics alike. *Vanishing Point* offers a study of the reverse scenario: it was a movie already compromised by its attempts to meld the ideologically conflicting modes of the action genre and the emerging youth-cult cycle, Sarafian's ambitions circumvented by studio head Zanuck, its distribution subsequently neglected by his successor. As a case study of a film in conflict with itself, Sarafian's *Vanishing Point* continues to fascinate not just through to the dynamic excitement of its chase scenes, but also in its unflinching willingness to follow the starting-point suggested by *Easy Rider* to its frightening conclusion, chronicling Kowalski's single-minded pursuit of his own self-destruction, one man's "apprenticeship toward becoming a projectile".¹²³

¹²³ Beck, p. 47.

PART IV: *Little Fauss and Big Halsy*

As productions sanctioned by the success of *Easy Rider*, the youth-cult road movies *Five Easy Pieces*, *Two-Lane Blacktop* and *Vanishing Point* have all been retrospectively enshrined in the New Hollywood canon, with critical attention focused on how the circumstances of their production yielded aesthetic outcomes that depart from standardised Hollywood industrial practices. However, many more entries in the post-*Easy Rider* youth-cult cycle have not been fortunate enough to enjoy such reappraisal. One such film is *Little Fauss and Big Halsy*, which offers an interesting point of comparison when considering how the New Hollywood canon came to be. Released within a month of *Five Easy Pieces*, *Little Fauss* enjoyed none of the success of Rafelson's work. Like Rafelson, *Little Fauss* director Sidney J. Furie enjoyed something of a globetrotting early career, taking him from his native Canada to the United Kingdom and finally, to the fringes (but never the inner-depths) of Hollywood. Furie's career trajectory stands in contrast to directors such as Rafelson and Hopper, whose opportunities to continue making their idiosyncratic, thematically consistent works declined as the New Hollywood moment receded. Both Hopper and Rafelson eventually re-emerged after a period of directorial absence with more generically conventional films that nonetheless lack the distinctive thematic and stylistic unity of their '70s works (*Five Easy Pieces*, *The King of Marvin Gardens* [dir. Bob Rafelson, Columbia Pictures, 1972] and *Stay Hungry* and *Easy Rider*, *The Last Movie* and *Out of the Blue* [dir. Dennis Hopper, Discovery Films, 1980] forming rough parallel trilogies of sorts). Furie, on the other hand, occupies territory closer to that of Richard C. Sarafian, or perhaps even Don Siegel: that of the dependable genre director who, at the moment of New Hollywood transition, made a handful of strange, hybrid works that blurred the distinctions between conventional genre outings and the new American arthouse cinema. By the mid-1970s, each of these directors had

returned to comparatively “straight” genre filmmaking, yet Sarafian’s *Vanishing Point* and Siegel’s *The Beguiled* (Universal Pictures, 1971) (and, it could be argued, *Dirty Harry*) demonstrate the strange things that can happen when the commercial imperatives of Hollywood genre cinema meld with the subversive characteristics of the New Hollywood. Sarafian’s *Vanishing Point* weathered its initial commercial failure, and now commands a cult audience.

As a self-conscious exercise in adherence to the post-*Easy Rider* youth-cult road movie cycle mould, Furie’s *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* manifestly failed to tap the wide commercial audience galvanised by Hopper’s earlier film. *Little Fauss* made less of an impact upon release than either *Vanishing Point* or *Two-Lane Blacktop*, and the subsequent decades have done nothing to rehabilitate its legacy. The film remains virtually unknown and inaccessible, given its lack of an official DVD release, its scarcity on VHS, and the unlikelihood of any but the most obscurantist curator programming it for a film festival, cinematheque or late night television broadcast. Nevertheless, while *Little Fauss* failed to act as a launching-pad for the careers of Furie, screenwriter Charles Eastman, and fledgling star Michael J. Pollard, it does feature the presence of one bona-fide movie star: Robert Redford, playing defiantly against type. Redford’s presence, and his attempts to distance himself from the film after its initial commercial failure, indicates the ways that stardom was shifting in the burgeoning New Hollywood, at both the point of production and in the process of reception.

By the time he came to work on *Little Fauss*, Sidney J. Furie was already an established filmmaker. Having relocated from Canada to the United Kingdom, Sidney J. Furie acquired an impressive five directorial credits in 1961, the horror films *Dr. Blood’s Coffin* (United Artists) and *The Snake Woman* (United Artists), *During One Night* (Gala Film Distributors), *Three On A Spree* (United Artists) and, most notably,

the Cliff Richard vehicle *The Young Ones* (Paramount Pictures). After the 1962 teddy-boy exploitation title *The Boys* (Gala Film Distributors), Furie returned to that genre two years later with *The Leather Boys*, which melded biker-exploitation with British kitchen-sink realism and homo-erotic subtext. Furie's energetic visual style was brought to bear on his subsequent film, *The Ipcress File* (Universal Pictures, 1965), a hiply nihilistic revision of the still-novel James Bond franchise which had recently been inaugurated with *Dr. No* (dir. Terrence Young, United Artists, 1962). In *The Ipcress File*, Furie's harsh daylight-noir-inspired look served as a fitting environment for Michael Caine's down-at-heel Harry Palmer, a stark cinematic contrast to the glamorous, lushly cinematic environs inhabited by Sean Connery's smooth Bond.

The Ipcress File was a significant enough international breakthrough to ensure Furie's passage to Hollywood, where he helmed a series of routine genre entities: the western *The Appaloosa* (1966) for Universal, the Frank-Sinatra-starring spy-thriller *The Naked Runner* (1967) for Warner Bros., and finally, the 1970 courtroom drama *The Lawyer* for Universal, which would be the first lead role for future *Vanishing Point* star Barry Newman (and which would prove equally unsuccessful at elevating his star). In 1970, an overworked and under-appreciated (by his own reckoning) Furie gave a candid interview with Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine, wherein he expressed his dissatisfaction with the Hollywood machine, and his place in it. Of his experience in Hollywood, Furie said, "I knew before starting each of these pictures that they wouldn't work, but I couldn't quit... I'm just a naive, stupid guy".¹²⁴ He hoped that his next film, *Little Fauss and Big Halsy*, would better represent his aesthetic tastes, and grant him the creative freedom he sought within the industry.

¹²⁴ Kenneth Geist, "inter/VIEW with Sidney Furie", *Interview*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (1970), p. 12.

Little Fauss and Big Halsy adopts the kind of generational conflict that is central to *Easy Rider*, and makes it a central feature of its promotional identity. The tagline for the film reads: “They’re not your father’s heroes”. More so than *Vanishing Point* and *Two-Lane Blacktop*, *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* is an overt repackaging of the elements of *Easy Rider*. The parallels between Furie and Hopper’s films are numerous: the central fixation on motorcycles, the conspicuous branding of a rock and roll soundtrack (in the case of *Little Fauss and Big Halsy*, a slate of original songs by Johnny Cash comprises the soundtrack LP), the presence of a screenwriter of strong literary pedigree (Terry Southern in the case of Hopper’s film, and Charles Eastman on *Little Fauss*), and the casting of a buddy/antagonistic duo in the two lead roles, consisting of a conventional “star” figure, and an off-kilter off-sider (Fonda/Redford, against Hopper/Pollard).

Little Fauss and Big Halsy was written by Charles Eastman, brother of Carole (*Five Easy Pieces* and Hellman’s *The Shooting* - the latter of which featured an uncredited Charles as an extra). Charles Eastman’s truncated career follows the same halting path mapped out by Bobby Dupea in Carole’s *Five Easy Pieces*; in fact, in an *LA Times* obituary piece following Charles’ death in 2009, Robert Towne speculated that Charles Eastman may have been a model for his sister’s Dupea character.¹²⁵ According to the same obituary article, Charles Eastman began his career writing for the stage in the late 1950s, before working as a script-doctor and writing a number of original screenplays in the 1960s, which he refused to option to studios unless he could direct them himself. This degree of control would rarely be granted to a first-time writer director prior to the post-*Easy Rider* Hollywood boom - under the more rigid confines of the Classical studio production, these creative roles were almost always distinctly detached from one another. *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* would be

¹²⁵ Dennis McLellan, “Obituaries: Charles Eastman dies at 79; playwright and screenwriter”, *Los Angeles Times* (10 July 2009). <<http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jul/10/local/me-charles-eastman10>>. (Accessed 16 February 2014).

Eastman's first feature-length screenplay to be realised. He would acquire only two further credits to his name in his lifetime: the Jon Voight boxing picture *The All-American Boy* (Warner Bros., 1973 - Eastman's only directorial effort, working from his own screenplay) and Hal Ashby's *Second-Hand Hearts* (Paramount Pictures, 1981). Eastman's screenplay for *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* displays his literary bent, featuring such lyrical scene descriptions as, "grey ovals of grazing sheep spot a vast rolling pasture washed in the leaning light of evening".¹²⁶ Eastman's screenwriting also demonstrates his ear for dialogue, as in a particular truckstop lament delivered by Halsy which crystallises the ennui of geographic displacement that Hellman would later make central to *Two Lane Blacktop*: "Hey, did you ever noticed that you can drive all day and all night, and wherever you stop, it's the same greasy hamburgers, same fried egg, served by the same fat waitress, it's just like you never went nowhere at all".¹²⁷

The story follows two riders on the dirtbike racing circuit: the mechanically-adept but personally aloof amateur racer Little Fauss (played by Michael J. Pollard), and the manipulative, perpetually-broke professional racer Halsy Knox (Redford), who meet at a race in Arizona. Fauss, who has only his parents (cluckily played by Noah Beery Jr. and Lucile Benson) as friends, is star-struck by Halsy, who quickly exploits his newfound admirer's mechanical abilities. Fauss' over-protective parents do not approve of their son's friendship with Halsy, and the familial relationship is damaged further when Fauss clandestinely slips from the family home to tour the national racing circuit with Halsy, who plans to race under Fauss' name due to his own ban from competing. Their friendship, which consists of the eager-to-please Fauss acquiescing to every demand of the lecherous, womanising Halsy, is tested with the arrival of the absurdly-monikered Rita Nebraska (Lauren Hutton), who

¹²⁶ Charles Eastman, *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* (New York: Pocket Books, 1970), p. 44.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 94.

becomes involved with Halsy, spurning the infatuated Fauss. In an attempt to impress Rita, Fauss takes up racing himself, and promptly breaks his leg in an accident. The narrative begins to fall apart at this point. Fauss moves back to his parents house, and an indeterminate period of time passes; the fact that Fauss' father has died in the intervening time period is mentioned in the dialogue, but not shown onscreen. Halsy shows up at the Fauss household with a pregnant Rita in tow, but Fauss sends them both away as he singlemindedly trains for his return to racing. Later, Fauss encounters Halsy at a race, and nonchalantly reveals that he has been drafted - a single line delivered with such understatement, and which attracts so little reaction from Halsy, that it is easily missed. The two compete in a race together, and the film ends before the winner is decided.

Little Fauss and Big Halsy does not adhere to a traditional, causally-motivated narrative mode, but nor does it self-consciously subvert generic expectations to the extent of Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* or many of Robert Altman's films of the period. *Little Fauss*' opening shot, a long-take wide-shot of dust rising as motorcycle racers interminably cross the horizon, could well have come from Hellman's film, but for the most part Furie's directorial style hews closer to a classical model, favouring wide camera set-ups and spatially-coherent continuity editing. *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* employs neither the studiously minimal aesthetic of Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop*, nor the stylistic self-consciousness of the more lyrical passages of *Easy Rider*, *Five Easy Pieces* or *Vanishing Point*. Rare instances when Furie incorporates a more overtly cinematic mode of representation (for example, the helicopter shots of Halsy's truck, or the flash-frames, a la *Easy Rider*, which introduce Rita Nebraska), are relatively incongruous. A further source of incongruity is found in the tone of the film's performances. The conflict between Little and Halsy offers the dramatic grist of the film, but neither character is sufficiently developed to flesh out their individual

lives and personalities. Michael J. Pollard, having played the sympathetic loser C.W. Moss in *Bonnie and Clyde*, gives a naturalistic performance in the lead as Little Fauss, which is undercut by his occasional over-played stuttering delivery, and is tonally inconsistent with the far broader performances of Benson and Beery as Ma and Pa Fauss.¹²⁸ In the wake of *Bonnie and Clyde*, Pollard's potential stardom perhaps seemed no less likely than that of his cast-mate Gene Hackman. Nevertheless, Pollard's casting in the lead role as Little Fauss still seems something of a gamble. While the New Hollywood moment managed to produce such unconventional superstars as Hackman, the success of *Little Fauss* depended upon Pollard's ability to channel the energetic screen presence of a Hackman or Nicholson.

Robert Redford, on the other hand, was already something of a superstar at a moment of transition, having attracted major attention for his lead role in *Barefoot in the Park* (dir. Gene Saks, Paramount Pictures, 1967), and established his magnetic, affable, easy-going screen charm with his star-making turn in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). Redford's outings in the year of *Butch Cassidy's* release, as a highly-motivated competitive skier playing opposite Gene Hackman in Michael Ritchie's *Downhill Racer*, and as a sheriff hunting Robert Blake's fugitive Native American in blacklisted-director Abraham Polonsky's *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* (Universal Pictures), did nothing to consolidate his standing as superstar, and *Little Fauss* was certainly not the showcase vehicle he required. Halsy Knox is a singularly unlikeable character. Viewed in a certain light, *Little Fauss* could actually function as a deliberate subversion and deconstruction Redford's stardom and golden-boy looks, as Halsy, the loafish cad, relies on his looks and charm to manipulate all of those

¹²⁸ An unsympathetic Susan Rice said in her review of the film in *Take One* that, "Michael Pollard's mugging becomes more tiresome with every film - and especially so in two viewings of this one". See Susan Rice, "Little Fauss and Big Halsy", *Take One*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (November-December 1969, pub. 9 November 1970), p. 23.

around him.¹²⁹ Redford, an actor possessing the charisma to anchor a film, should by all rights be the draw-card attraction of *Little Fauss*, but the film does not treat him kindly. Eastman's screenplay goes out of its way to cast Halsy in an unflattering light. His entrance to the film involves him covertly stealing sandwiches hidden in his motorcycle helmet at a race. He spends much of the film looming on the sidelines of the action, observing as he chews gum or compulsively brushes his teeth, a leering, arrested, often shirtless force of teeming masculinity. In a supposedly heartfelt moment of candour, he confides in Fauss that his past sexual partners were "all dogs." Later in the film, he signifies his romantic interest in Rita Nebraska upon their first meeting by plunging his hands down his pants in what Pauline Kael sardonically noted was "perhaps a cinematic first".¹³⁰

As a work emerging in a cinematic moment that is not exactly known for its sensitive portrayal of female characters, *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* seems to reserve a particular brand of cruelty towards women. The central premise of the film concerns a chauvinistic tug of war between the two male protagonists for ownership of the Rita Nebraska character, a not dissimilar scenario to *Two-Lane Blacktop*, except that Lauren Hutton's Rita is afforded none of the agency of Laurie Bird's character in Hellman's film.¹³¹ The overt sexual politics of Furie's film are complicated by the undercurrent of homoeroticism that persists throughout the picture, a dimension of the buddy formula that goes unacknowledged in either *Easy Rider* or *Two-Lane Blacktop*, but which Furie had already made central to his earlier *The Leather Boys*. Even pre-dating Furie's involvement with *Little Fauss*, the homoerotic motif is suggested by much of the language of Eastman's screenplay, as in the scene when Little Fauss

¹²⁹ *Downhill Racer* perhaps does the same thing.

¹³⁰ Pauline Kael, "Men in Trouble", *The New Yorker* (31 October 1970), reprinted in Kael, *Deeper Into Movies* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 173.

¹³¹ Another interesting motif in *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* is the origin of the enormous scar on Halsy's back. At numerous points in the film he offers contradicting explanations for it - motorcycle crash, Vietnam War injury, or an accident on stairs as a teenager. Warren Oates' GTO character plays a similar game with his back-story in *Two-Lane Blacktop*.

brings Halsy home for the first time, and the two future rivals bond over a record of motorcycle sound effects, ending with the two men somnolently tangled in a pointedly post-coital embrace:

Removing shoes and socks, jackets, shirts and pants, LITTLE and HALSY tiptoe around the room as though silence would redeem them.

LITTLE gets an idea. He calls for attention with broad drunken gestures. He takes an LP from the shelf and puts it on the phonograph and then before the sound begins he reveals the album face to HALSY, counting on the latter's bliss.

Sounds of the Grand Prix.

HALSY grabs the album hungrily and settles on the bed in dirty shorts and t-shirt. LITTLE lies on the floor. They face each other enraptured and pick their toes and listen, as though it were Tchaikovsky, to the deafening sound of over a hundred motorcycles...

In their euphoria, HALSY and LITTLE FAUSS have slumped in repose and finally sleep as the Grand TT at Sachsen-Ring continues, with German commentary.¹³²

Such suggestive language persists in Eastman's description of a group of motorcyclists lining up pre-race, "stuffed into white workpants so tight a smudged relief of comb and wallet is stamped on every rear, while a small wad in front could be either penis or car keys," and in a tension-charged dialogue late in the film where Fauss challenges Halsy's ability to stay erect - both characters are quick to clarify that they are referring to sitting upright in the motorcycle saddle.¹³³ The implication is that given their inability to recognise their desire for one another, these confused feelings are channelled into the war for the affections of Rita. Three years after a bisexual sub-

¹³² Charles Eastman, pp. 49-50.

¹³³ Ibid, pp. 67, 147-8.

plot had been vetoed by Warner Bros. in *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* was unable to do much more with similar material, and the aimless air that permeates the closing segments of the film represents another missed opportunity, both on the part of the characters, and the filmmakers.¹³⁴

The marketing materials for *Big Fauss and Little Halsy* channel the spirit of the youth-cult road movie cycle, stressing a sense of generational conflict. The liner notes of the soundtrack LP specifically invoke the unfashionable western genre in opposition to the motorcycle cult:

They're not your father's heroes. Once upon a time, a generation ago, there was a movie idol. The cowboy. Clean-cut, clean-shaven, the all-American super-hero - Hoot Gibson, Johnny Mack Brown and Tom Mix - rode the western plains astride trusty steeds in search of Indians and desperados. These were your father's heroes...

Today's heroes and their steeds are something again! The drifter has replaced the cowpoke, and the motorcycle has superseded the mustang. A new, adventuresome cult has arisen - cycle buffs, and riding in with them comes a new trend in films.

Such a film is Paramount Pictures' *Little Fauss and Big Halsy*, a saga of today. And let's face it, *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* are *not* your father's heroes.¹³⁵

Unlike *Easy Rider*, which consciously nods to Hopper's history with the western while inverting the tropes of that genre, *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* dismisses the western in its advertising slogans in an attempt to capture a youth audience unified in its disdain for the western. Similarly, the blurb of Eastman's published screenplay aligns the film with the burgeoning New Hollywood, stating, "filled with the raw

¹³⁴ Harris, p. 207.

¹³⁵ Shaun Considine, liner notes for *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* soundtrack LP (New York: Columbia Records, 1970), emphasis in original.

truth of the world it depicts... like *Easy Rider* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, [*Little Fauss and Big Halsy*] will last in your mind".¹³⁶ However, the film only ever really pays lip service to the notion of a generational counterculture struggle, as when Pa Fauss complains of "monkey-faced sideburns." The generous, protective Ma and Pa Fauss are little more than cogs in the narrative machinery to provide dramatic counterpoint to Little's decision to flee the family home and accompany Halsy on the racing circuit, denied sufficient development to bring further emotional resonance to this moment of parting, or to become more meaningful symbols of a more universal generational conflict.

A further missed opportunity to capture a youth audience comes in the presence of Johnny Cash on the film's soundtrack. Cash was not exactly the selling point to the youth audience that Jimi Hendrix and The Band had been on the *Easy Rider* soundtrack - by 1970, the man in black had mellowed into hosting his own television show on ABC, which showcased, among other guests, the newly country-fried Bob Dylan promoting his *Nashville Skyline* album, itself a divisive point of contention amongst his fan-base.

Eastman's screenplay ends on a poetic description of the final race: "somewhere is Halsy, somewhere is Little, but they are lost in the crowd or they are not winners but rather among those who make no significant mark and leave no permanent trace".¹³⁷ In the film, *Furie* represents this retreat from didactic narrative focus with a freeze frame that literally halts the race in its tracks, while the soundtrack continues over the top - the racers immobilised, the dramatic struggles that have concerned the film are frozen in time and rendered irrelevant across a field of interchangeable, transient, anonymous, undifferentiated racers. As a film without direction or drama, the cinematic grammar cancels itself out and halts in its very

¹³⁶ Charles Eastman, p. 1.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 160.

tracks – but unlike *Two-Lane Blacktop*, *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* is too lethargic even to burn, and simply ends at what should be its highest moment of drama.

Little Fauss and Big Halsy apparently came and went without a trace. It is difficult to even locate reviews of the film, although *Variety* called it, “uneven, sluggish,” “often pretentious” and lambasted the “lack of strong dramatic development [of] Redford’s character... apparent in his very first scene; it never changes”.¹³⁸ In *Interview* magazine, Maggie Puner called it “a bad film in every respect. From its trite opening shot... to its trite closing freeze frame of Robert Redford absolutely nothing of importance happens”.¹³⁹ Pauline Kael hated the film as a particularly cynical and opportunistic entry in the youth-cult cycle, viewing it as demonstrative only “of the crassness of confused merchandisers”.¹⁴⁰ Susan Rice could say only that, “it must have looked great on paper”.¹⁴¹ The failure of *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* shows the risk inherent in casting Robert Redford against type. Two of his subsequent films, namely Peter Yates’ adaptation of the Donald E. Westlake caper *The Hot Rock* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1972), and his reunion with *Downhill Racer* director Michael Ritchie on the political satire *The Candidate*, would receive a greater degree of critical acclaim. But it was not until the following year, when he re-teamed with *Butch Cassidy* director George Roy Hill on *The Sting* (Universal Pictures, 1973), essentially reprising his role as the Sundance Kid, that his cinematic legacy, his career path through the remainder of the decade, and his ascent to the director’s chair, was assured. Redford’s star persona was very much in the old-time mould, and his breakout roles were in essentially classical films that resisted the trends of the New Hollywood moment, allowing him to comfortably weather the

¹³⁸ Anon, “*Variety* reviews: *Little Fauss and Big Halsy*”, *Variety* (31 December 1969). <<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117792633?refcatid=31>>. (Accessed 16 February 2014).

¹³⁹ Maggie Puner, “Full of sound and Sidney J. Furie”, *Interview*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (1970), p. 11.

¹⁴⁰ Kael, “Men in Trouble”, *Deeper Into Movies*, p. 173.

¹⁴¹ Susan Rice, “*Little Fauss and Big Halsy*”, *Take One*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (September-October 1969, pub. 17 September 1970), p. 21.

changes in the industry in the late 1970s, and assuring his career longevity. Michael J. Pollard never really looked to be anything other than a character actor, and after his unlikely starring role in *Little Fauss*, he maintained his presence in a sporadic series of character bit parts. As an exercise in repeating the generic template offered by *Easy Rider*, the failure of *Little Fauss* demonstrates that while the subversion of genre was briefly commercially sanctioned in the New Hollywood moment (at least at the level of production, if not reception), the subversion of stardom was not. This is not to suggest that audiences would necessarily overlook other shortcomings in order to blissfully consume Redford's performance, whether cast to type or not. But the film's failure does reveal that stardom alone could not trump the aspects of the New Hollywood formula that were aligning and reconfiguring in the struggle to find an audience. Nevertheless, the case of *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* demonstrates that in the warm afterglow of *Butch Cassidy*, audiences were as-yet unprepared to accept Redford as an unlikable cad. In New Hollywood moment, movie star typology may have shifted, but the necessity of a bankable commodity playing to type had not.

PART V: *Adam at 6 A.M.*

Five Easy Pieces was released on 12 September 1970. Ten days later, the first screenings of Robert Scheerer's *Adam at 6 A.M.* were held. The strange case of this largely-forgotten film offers an interesting point of contrast with Rafelson's film, both in its many narrative similarities, and in its comparatively disastrous box-office performance. The opening of *Adam* casts it in the company of the contemporaneous cycle of campus rebellion films that sprung up at the start of the decade, mostly distributed through Columbia Pictures (for example, *Getting Straight* [dir. Richard Rush, Columbia Pictures, May 13 1970]; *The Strawberry Statement* [dir. Stuart Hagman, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 15 June 1970]; *R.P.M.* [dir. Stanley Kramer, Columbia Pictures, 16 September 1970]; *Drive, He Said*, [dir. Jack Nicholson, Columbia Pictures, 13 June 1971]), but *Adam at 6 A.M.* quickly turns its focus from West Coast campus life to mid-west small town living. Its depiction of class-obfuscation also proves near-identical to *Five Easy Pieces*.¹⁴² The most marked difference between the two films comes not in their content but their relative fortunes, as Rafelson's film remains one of the best-loved and well-remembered touchstones of the period, whereas Scheerer's film is all-but forgotten. The overarching lesson to take from the case of *Adam at 6 A.M.* is that even in the creatively-liberated New Hollywood, a film's ability to find its audience could be determined not by its adherence to contemporary trends, narrative preoccupations, or stylistic approaches, but by the mechanisms of distribution, and the old-fashioned star system. Of further interest is a hostile exchange between the producers of *Adam* and its distributor, which appeared in the pages of *Take One* magazine, indicating the limitations of the

¹⁴² A detailed survey of this campus revolution cycle, and the response it generated in the radical press of the era, may be found in Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Reel Revolutionaries: An Examination of Hollywood's Cycle of 1960s Youth Rebellion Films", *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Spring 2002), pp. 38-58.

modes of independent production and distribution that became increasingly prevalent in the early 1970s.

Adam at 6 A.M. was written by two residents of the town of Excelsior Springs, Missouri, where much of the movie is set: Elinor Karph (daughter of local dentist and school teacher, as proudly noted the *Kansas City Star*) and her husband Stephen Karph.¹⁴³ It would be the theatrical debut for its director, Robert Scheerer, who had been directing in television since the early 1960s, accumulating credits on such shows as *The Andy Williams Show* (NBC, 1962-63), *The Danny Kaye Show* (CBS, 1963-64), *Gilligan's Island* (CBS, 1966), and a number of made-for-TV movies and specials, with titles including the Barbra Streisand concert-film *A Happening in Central Park* (CBS, 1968), *The Fred Astaire Show* (NBC, 1968), and the musical *Hans Brinker* (NBC, 1969). Produced for Cinema Center Films by Steve McQueen's new Solar Productions production company, *Adam* was shot on location in Missouri in 1969, with many non-professional locals cast in the film, continuing the New Hollywood trend of location shooting and quasi-documentary production practice.

Adam begins with Michael Douglas' Adam Gaines working as a professor of semantics at a West Coast university after completing his PhD (a running gag throughout the film stems from Adam's inability to explain exactly what a doctorate in semantics entails to puzzled middle-Americans who mistake him for a MD). Quickly falling into an apathetic rut in his new job, Adam spontaneously drives across the country to attend the funeral of a distant relative in Missouri, and, seduced by the small-town way of life, decides to remain there for the summer, taking a job with a local power and light work crew. Adam bonds with his working-class colleagues, and falls in love with a local teenager, Jerri Jo Hopper (Lee Purcell), eventually asking her to marry him. However, Adam and Jerri Jo are unable to

¹⁴³ Barry Garron, "Soap Opera Turns Out to be a 'Capitol' idea", *Kansas City Star* (date unknown). <<http://www.exsmo.com/museum/famous/karph/V1.100.105.11.jpg>>. (Accessed 23 April 2013).

reconcile their divergent ambitions in life (his to travel the world, hers to buy a house and start a family in Excelsior Springs), and on their wedding day, dispatched by his mother-in-law-to-be to buy ice cream for the reception, Adam decides to run out on his new life, taking to the open road and a future unknown.

Adam at 6 A.M. shares many similarities with *Five Easy Pieces*. Like Rafelson's film, *Adam* follows a disaffected young man who turns his back on his upper-middle class origins and subsumes himself in manual labour, trading in that totemic symbol of his class status, the red Porsche, for a spot in the back of a pick-up truck heading out to a day's work on site. The films also share ambivalent portrayals of working-class Americans, with *Adam at 6 A.M.* alternating from sneering condescension to romanticised dotage. The narrative content of *Adam* places it as something of a missing link between *The Graduate* and *Five Easy Pieces*: its protagonist, Adam, continues the professional trajectory of Benjamin Braddock from Mike Nichols' film, carrying his disaffection into graduate-level study and a professorial position. *Adam at 6 A.M.* then follows its protagonist's flight from the world of academia into the middle-America of his family origins, his embrace of blue-collar labour a kind of mirroring of *Five Easy Pieces*, in which Nicholson's Bobby Dupea begins the film well off-the-radar working in manual labour, and gradually makes the journey north back to the cultured family home.

A key concern of *Adam At 6 A.M.* is youth's need to stake a claim of individuality distinct from its parents' generation, an interest that clearly aligns *Adam at 6 A.M.* with the thematic concerns of the 1967-1971 youth-cult moment. Scheerer begins his film with a direct visual quotation from one of his most obvious sources of influence. Its second shot, the first shot of its opening credit sequence, replicates a prominent shot from *The Graduate*: a high angle, wide, long-take telephoto lens shot of the protagonist's figure walking across a university plaza. Coupled with Adam's

desire to differentiate himself from the values of his forebears is his attempt to adopt the professional and social rituals of the working class. As *Adam* develops, its protagonist's experiences of inter-generational conflict and the schism between the cultural values of different classes mirrors Benjamin's general malaise under the weight of his forebears' professional expectations. Adam's individual struggle is also articulated in a dialogue exchange early in *Adam at 6 A.M.*, in which the privileged, educated protagonist escalates a trivial verbal dispute with a working-class individual into an assertion of intellectual superiority. Michael Douglas' Adam Gaines is the target of a spirited harangue from a blue-collar resident of Excelsior Springs about Hollywood's inability to make 'em like they used to: "Tell me what in the hell is the meaning of those depressing and pervert type movies that you people make out there in California? I mean why? Do you call that entertainment?" When Adam level-headedly replies that, "Well, some people have different tastes," his assailant launches into a tirade against the cultured intelligentsia that Adam represents, and its disjuncture with the simple values of the country's heartland, a dichotomy of taste that is not only geographically, but implicitly generationally, ordered: "There's not just New York and Los Angeles, you know. Tell them that for me, will ya? There's a whole country here full of people looking for just a good Sunday afternoon movie, not all that arty psychological crap they keep putting up at New York and Los Angeles... We're crying for good musicals here. I mean I got troubles of my own, what do I wanna see people up there suffering? I tell you who I like, is Julie Andrews".¹⁴⁴ This final pronouncement causes Adam to choke on his Coca-Cola, and, challenged to name a single movie that he enjoys, replies with *Blow-Up* (dir. Michelangelo Antonioni, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1966), prompting an anguished reply of, "Oh my god... that damn movie!"

¹⁴⁴ The reference to Andrews is perhaps an ironic acknowledgement of Scheerer's own very unfashionable not-too-distant past in television musical specials.

This exchange is a remarkable moment in the New Hollywood/youth-cult cycle of films. Not only does it explicitly draw upon and verbalise the kind of inter-generational antagonism that has pervaded films from *The Graduate* through *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces* (and couching it, like the final of those films, within a class-conscious discourse), it is also the most prominently self-reflexive and explicitly verbalised instance of cinematic self-identification as a constituent work within the body of New Hollywood films. Within the cinema-literate and self-consciously cinephilic New Hollywood moment, no other film would so literally state its intentions and declare its filmic lineage, casting a dividing line between the outdated tastes of the small-town, heartland fuddy-duddies (going so far as to name Julie Andrews as a paragon of unfashionability), and the adoption of the European art cinemas of the 1960s by a sophisticated younger generation. Antonioni's particularly hip brand of existential angst and cryptic alienation clearly serves as a generational touchstone and mission statement of sorts for both Adam and *Adam*. The confrontation concludes with a pointed inquiry from the elder antagonist: "You know, as a matter of fact, I've got a question I'd like to ask you, if you're not afraid to answer: well why doesn't a young man like yourself, present company excepted, of course, why doesn't he get off his behind and make a buck? And be willing to defend his country just like I had to? What right's he got to live off his family until he's damn near 30?" Such dialogue may well have been taken word for word from the Louisiana diner scene from *Easy Rider*, casting Adam as a pariah representative of the perceived ills of his entire generation, embodied in the decadence, disaffection, entitlement, and general ennui found in his cinematic predilection for *Blow-Up*. These overt allusions to Antonioni consciously position *Adam at 6 A.M.* within a particular cinematic lineage, while the casting of the young Michael Douglas in just his second starring role draws on a similar vein of generational tension as Peter Fonda's casting

in *Easy Rider*, with the mythic stature of their elders adding a significant, extra-textual dimension to both films.

The ending of *Adam at 6 A.M.* mirrors the sense of disillusionment and failure that pervades most films of the New Hollywood. Deciding that his experiment with class differentiation has failed, Adam's decision to abandon Jerri-Jo, the woman he has spent the entirety of the film courting, on their wedding day, neatly inverts the ending of *The Graduate*, in which Benjamin interrupts the nuptials of Elaine and Carl. As Elaine and Benjamin board the school bus bound for an uncertain future, an air of disquiet falls over Nichols' film, as the triumphant gesture of the interrupted marriage ceremony is muted in the conclusion, the implication being that the matrimonial future Benjamin and Elaine are heading towards may well end up resembling the lives of their defeated parents. This desire to stake an identity distinct from one's forebears is the very instinct that motivates Adam to abandon his marriage at the conclusion of Scheerer's film, a sentiment that echoes the ending of *Five Easy Pieces*, when Bobby Dupea abandons Rayette at a service station. The fact that these two films were released concurrently, and produced entirely independently of one another, suggests that any direct correlations of influence from one film to the other are unlikely. Such similarities are instead evidence of the forces of parallel development within the New Hollywood commercial moment, as elements of previous hits were adopted and recombined in search of a winning commercial formula. In its use of an alienated protagonist, college/youth-cult setting, inter-generational/class conflict, self-conscious cinematic allusions, and downbeat ending, *Adam at 6 A.M.* ticks many of the requisite boxes for inclusion in the New Hollywood canon. The fact of its box-office failure and present-day obscurity points to the power that the old-fashioned Hollywood mechanisms of distribution would play in

permitting any New Hollywood film to find an audience, and a place in cinema history.

Adam was released by National General, the independent distributor for Cinema Center, which had released such films as *Little Big Man*, *The Boys in the Band* (dir. William Friedkin, 1970) and *Big Jake* (dir. George Sherman, 1971). The story of *Adam*'s theatrical run is told in the "Picture Grosses" columns in *Variety* from September through October 1970, and in an extraordinary written exchange between its producers Rick Rosenberg and Robert W. Christiansen with the editors of *Take One*, which appeared in the March 1971 issue of that magazine. Rosenberg and Christiansen had contacted the editors of *Take One* after receiving a glowing review from Susan Rice in an earlier issue, wherein she praised their film as "the first of the *Easy Rider* spin-offs that really works".¹⁴⁵ Rice suggested that *Adam* represented a high water mark for the burgeoning new American cinema, singling out, "Michael Douglas's performance which is controlled, suggestive and unmannered," along with "Robert Scheerer's fine direction".

This is his first film and it has none of the annoying gimmickry that seems to characterize the Young American New Wave. His direction of non-professionals makes them indistinguishable from the very competent major characters. *Adam* contains just the kind of unsensational material that most directors feel compelled to overstate and overdo. Scheerer makes it believable and graceful by being unintrusive [sic].¹⁴⁶

Rice's positive review prompted Rosenberg and Christiansen to pen an open letter to the editors of *Take One* in the hope of salvaging the commercial fortunes of their feature, taking the drastic step of effectively condemning their distributors in print: "Cinema Center Films and National General, who released the film, never believed in

¹⁴⁵ Susan Rice, "Adam at 6AM", *Take One*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (September-October 1969, pub. 17 September 1970), p. 23.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 24.

it and as a result we have had a terrible time with the release and promotion of the picture,” leaving them with, “a good film that hardly anyone has seen... [and that] nobody at the studio cares [about]”.¹⁴⁷

Before publishing Rosenberg and Christiansen’s letter, the editor and publisher of *Take One*, Peter Lebensold, contacted Gordon Stulberg, the president of Cinema Center Films, offering him, “the opportunity to reply to some of the charges levelled against your firm”.¹⁴⁸ One can only imagine what stern words Stulberg had with Christiansen and Rosenberg, prompting their contrite reply to *Take One* which began with, “Mr. Stulberg suggested we answer your letter to him since we were all in agreement that we had, unfortunately, neglected to fill you in on all the facts in regard to this matter”.¹⁴⁹ Christiansen and Rosenberg’s second letter spells out the whole sad tale of *Adam at 6A.M.*’s commercial failings, a narrative of misfortune and woe that is so full of twists and turns that it warrants including at length:

Mr. Stulberg pointed out that Cinema Center Films and National General spent a lot of money opening our film in the mid-west and that we had certainly favoured opening the picture in that area since we believed it would do well at the box-office there.

Aside from the advertising campaign, which we objected to, the opening was handled very well. However, we opened in approximately two hundred theatres in the mid-west and did poor business in almost every situation. *Adam* was immediately labelled ‘a dog.’

We all tried to guess why the film had failed in these situations. Mr. Stulberg points out that all box-office revenue was off about forty-four percent during that period and ours was but one picture among many to be hurt. Furthermore,

¹⁴⁷ Rick Rosenberg and Robert W. Christiansen in “The *Adam at 6A.M.* Dossier”, *Take One*, Vol. 2, No. 10 (March-April 1970, pub. March 17 1971), p. 6.

¹⁴⁸ Peter Lebensold in “The *Adam at 6A.M.* Dossier”, *Take One*, Vol. 2, No. 10 (March-April 1970, pub. March 17 1971), p. 6.

¹⁴⁹ Rosenberg and Christiansen in “The *Adam at 6A.M.* Dossier”, *Take One*, p. 6.

we opened in the middle of September during the premiere week of the new television season and had to compete against first showings of *The Dirty Dozen* and *The Cincinnati Kid* on television. Also, school was just beginning and we felt that this was not to our advantage either.

As a result of these initial bookings, and a few that followed, the company decided not to spend a great deal of money to open the picture in New York or Los Angeles which we were requesting as we believed that since our reviews had been good we had a chance to recover in these major cities.

Mr. Stulberg said that if the picture had displayed any strength in one of its situations, he would have acted differently with regard to our budget for opening the film in New York and Los Angeles. Although he personally liked the film, he attributed its failure at the box-office mainly due to a lack of a strong word of mouth and the presence of a magnetic star.

Our displeasure with certain aspects of how the picture was handled should have been pinpointed for you. For example, we had objected to all the advertising and material on the picture and these objections were largely ignored until Mr. Stulberg came to our aid. However, only one ad was changed for the Kansas City premiere date.

We later found out that most of the theatres where the film played were huge barns. In St. Louis it was booked into three theatres, one of which seated over three thousand people. In Denver the house held around two thousand seats and in Dallas we were in a theatre where *Space Odyssey* had played. In San Francisco the picture opened in three houses on a double bill.

Our unhappiness was further heightened when we read in *Variety* that the picture opened in Baltimore with no advance promotion.

Since *Adam at Six A.M.* did not have a star to help sell it, we felt, after the initial dates, that the picture should be handled like *Joe* or *Five Easy Pieces*. Again Gordon Stulberg came to our aid when we requested a special publicity man be put on the picture for the New York and Los Angeles dates.

A publicist was hired, but because of budget limitations and the inability to set a firm date for either opening, his efforts were not as effective as they might have been had he had more to work with.

We asked that the film be booked in Los Angeles and New York before or around Thanksgiving. We finally ended up with two and three week limited runs which started and ended right before Christmas. It is a dismal time to try and do business.

Although we received very good reviews in both cities, we understand that National General is still having trouble booking the film.

It is our belief that if the company had spent more money for the New York and Los Angeles openings and had opened the picture earlier we would have had a better chance.¹⁵⁰

Seemingly a casualty of the very cultural gulf between America's coastal and inland cities that it describes, due to a combination of mis-marketing and poor timing, *Adam* dismally failed to attract an audience in the geographical heartland that it so lovingly depicts - although Adam's eventual decision to abandon Jerri Jo, who is condescendingly treated throughout, may likely have rankled those rare midwesterners who did manage to see the film. If Christiansen and Rosenberg's claim that Stulberg "personally liked the film" is to be taken at face value, *Adam's* eventual failure resulted less from any malice or concerted ill-will on the part of its distributor than it did from a misguided decision to open the earliest screenings of the film

¹⁵⁰ Rosenberg and Christiansen in "The *Adam at 6A.M.* Dossier", *Take One*, p. 6.

inland, rather than courting influential critical bastions and art-film literate audiences in major coastal cities.

This failure is borne out in the pages of *Variety*'s "Picture Grosses," beginning with the announcement of the world premiere of *Adam* for 22 September 1970 at Kansas City's Empire 1 Theatre, bolstered by the presence of its stars and producers, and promoted through a makeshift publicity office established in the local Hilton Inn, manned by "George Bannon, exploiter from the Dallas office".¹⁵¹ The presence of an on-site publicity department, and the interest accumulated by the locally-shot film, made by the production company of one-time Missouri resident Steve McQueen, did little to attract an audience, and its \$8000 take in its first week dipped to a "fairish" \$4000 take by its third week at the Empire, by which point it was comfortably outstripped by *Soldier Blue* (dir. Ralph Nelson, AVCO Embassy Pictures, 1970) "sparkling" with \$8000 in its fourth week showing; and *Joe*, a "healthy" \$7500; *Move* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg, Twentieth Century Fox, 1970) with \$8500 in its third week, and, most notably *M*A*S*H* taking a "startling \$6000, due to visiting farmers" in its thirtieth consecutive week in Kansas City.¹⁵² One title that *Adam* did manage to draw even with was *Catch 22* (dir. Mike Nichols, Paramount Pictures, 1970), which also took \$4000 - the notable difference being that Nichols' film was in its thirteenth week, demonstrating the considerably deeper pockets at Paramount than National General, permitting a film to continue running in order to chase residual revenue streams and, perhaps, permit a word-of-mouth following to grow in a way that was impossible for the smaller, and thus necessarily risk-averse, National General. Interestingly, both *M*A*S*H* and *Catch 22* held strong appeal for the *Easy Rider* youth demographic, as well as cross-over appeal for a broader market.

¹⁵¹ Anon, "Natl. Genl. Preems 'Adam' in K.C. Sept. 22", *Variety*, Vol. 260, Issue 3 (2 September 1970), p. 41.

¹⁵² Anon, "Natl. Genl. Preems 'Adam' in K.C. Sept. 22", *Variety*, p. 41; and Anon, "Pictures Grosses: 'Move' (3), \$12,000, K.C.; 'Bird' 20G", *Variety*, Vol. 260, Issue 8 (7 October 1970), p. 8.

Later in the year, *Variety* catalogued the reviews for *Adam* that had appeared to date in the New York press, finding four positive reviews (including Judith Crist in the *New York* magazine, and Archer Winsten in *The New York Post*), and a sole negative review (Vincent Canby in *The New York Times*).¹⁵³ These positive notices were not enough to steel National General to commit to a larger coastal release, effectively dooming *Adam* to its current fate: never released on DVD, it is only available in a low-quality rip on Youtube, and occasional airings for intrepid viewers of late-night television and Michael Douglas enthusiasts. Of all of the principals involved in the film, Douglas' career ultimately best weathered the fiasco. Although *Adam* did little to advance his star, his career longevity was better consolidated through the television detective show *The Streets of San Francisco* (ABC, 1972-76). However, it was only after producing *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (dir. Milos Forman, United Artists, 1975), and his own star-vehicle, *Romancing the Stone* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, Twentieth Century Fox, 1984), that he graduated to the kind of slick, corporate star-image which became synonymous with his defining roles in *Fatal Attraction* (dir. Adrian Lyne, Paramount Pictures, 1987), *Wall Street* (dir. Oliver Stone, Twentieth Century Fox, 1987), *Basic Instinct* (dir. Paul Verhoeven, TriStar Pictures, 1992), *Disclosure* (dir. Barry Levinson, Warner Bros., 1994), and *The Game* (dir. David Fincher, PolyGram Filmed Entertainment 1997). These later roles offer an ironic point of contrast to his countercultural drop-out persona in *Adam at 6 A.M.*¹⁵⁴ Reforged in the high-concept 1980s, Michael Douglas' eventual mode of stardom was a world away from the long-haired figure of generational angst he struck in the youth-cult moment. *Five Easy Pieces* represented a perfect storm, exploiting the star-on-the-rise of Jack Nicholson and relying on the full resources of BBS and Columbia to court favourable critical reviews and a wide audience. It was, and

¹⁵³ Anon, "Critics' Opinions", *Variety*, Vol. 261, Issue 4 (9 December 1970), p. 20.

¹⁵⁴ And of course, this slick persona was ironically subverted again in Douglas' casting as the psychotic everyman in *Falling Down* (dir. Joel Schumacher, Warner Bros., 1993).

remains, the making of Jack Nicholson, and a key touchstone in the New Hollywood moment. Comparatively, *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* cast Robert Redford against type, playing him against the wilfully obscure and uncommercial Michael J. Pollard. Furthermore, its distributor Paramount exhibited no inclination to persist with the film in the wake of negative press, and accordingly it was barely released. *Adam at 6.A.M.* would suffer the same fate: with no star, and, worse yet, no major studio behind it, *Adam* never stood a chance. The examples of all of these films demonstrate that themes and style did not necessarily permit inclusion into the New Hollywood canon. The traditional factors of stardom and distribution would still determine whether or not these films would reach the attentions of the critical gatekeepers who set the parameters of canonical inclusion, and in the event that positive reviews were granted, a distributor would still require sufficiently deep pockets to keep the film playing long enough to establish an audience. These are the very factors which consolidated studio power and prevented the rise of independent distributors during the old Hollywood. By and large, although the films may have looked different in 1971, the realities of distribution remained very much the same. The continuing relevance of stardom and studio power in the New Hollywood moment will be considered further in the next chapter, which turns its attention from the post-*Easy Rider* youth-cult cycle, and considers a separate, contemporaneous film cycle: the urban cop film.

CHAPTER THREE: POLITICISING GENRE

The disenfranchised men of the post-*Easy Rider* road movie cycle found the locus of their alienation on the open roads of the American back-country, yet in 1971 Hollywood was exploiting a thematically-comparable cycle featuring isolated men transplanted to urban environs. The protagonists of *Easy Rider*, *Vanishing Point* and *Two-Lane Blacktop* share an implied history, having turned their backs on urban dwellings in favour of the transitory, liminal spaces of the open road, a changing yet unchanging blur of truck stops, diners, motels, roadside campfires, and car backseats. The cinematography of *Easy Rider* and *Vanishing Point* counterpoint these settings with passages of lyrical landscape photography, suggesting that the grandeur of America's natural scenery may provide moments of transcendence, offering some validation for the nomadic drop-out lifestyles that Billy, Wyatt and Kowalski adopt as they race towards sinister appointments with destiny. Hellman's film finds Taylor's driver and Wilson's mechanic thoroughly enmeshed in an alternate underground economy of the streetracing circuit, which offers them a degree of autonomous self-sufficiency, provided they can keep moving fast enough. The slow burn that consumes the print at the end of that film suggests that inevitably, eventually, their machine will fail.

Factors such as costume design, soundtrack selection, and the vaguely anti-authoritarian stance adopted by many of the youth-cult road movies prompted critics in the early 1970s to label the cycle as inherently liberal, where they registered on the critical radar at all. The lukewarm response afforded to such a deliberately understated film as *Two-Lane Blacktop* is a dramatic counterpoint to the polarising furore generated by the release of *Dirty Harry* later that year. Within months of tepidly praising Hellman's film in a hesitant review, Roger Ebert was stirred to far stronger emotions by Don Siegel's film, which he lambasted as "fascist, no doubt

about it”.¹ Such accusations of fascism were echoed by the predominantly left-wing critical establishment at the time of *Dirty Harry*’s release. Yet with the benefit of historical distance, the distinctions between “liberal film” and “fascist film” look a little shaky. Far from offering a dangerously utopian vision of countercultural free-living, *Easy Rider* actually expresses a conflicted and open-ended political ideology, with its fiercest critics blinded to its fundamental conservatism by the bright colours of its countercultural trappings. Sampling a selection of *Easy Rider*’s imitators, we find the well-intentioned naivety of Billy and Wyatt stripped away leaving the resignation and pathological recalcitrance of Bobby Dupea, the suicidal fireball-in-waiting Kowalski, and the sketches in human form of *The Driver* and *The Mechanic*. While these films are open to different political readings, what these films share is, at base, the representation of alienated young men fleeing America’s urban centres. All of these characters bring with them, to varying degrees, suggestions of earlier lives left behind. This is made clearer in the expository passages of *Five Easy Pieces* and *Vanishing Point* (both of which, notably, are withheld until deep into their respective films), and left to be merely guessed at in the case of *Easy Rider* and *Two-Lane Blacktop*. Whether the protagonists of these films attempt to suppress their anxieties through a pantomime of downward mobility, temporarily appropriating blue-collar labour (Bobby Dupea, Kowalski, Adam Gaines), or turn further from society altogether, lured instead by the seductive charms of motor vehicular speed (Billy, Wyatt, *The Driver*, Little Fauss and Halsy Knox), ultimately, these films offer no happy endings. At best, these characters find themselves at the end of their films at crossroads of uncertainty, their situations no better than we found them two hours earlier.

¹ Roger Ebert, “*Dirty Harry*”, *Chicago Sun-Times* (1971). <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/dirty-harry-1971>>. (Accessed 23 February 2014).

What has gone largely unremarked upon in the literature to date is the dichotomous relationship shared by the largely rural America of the aforementioned road movie cycle, and the flip side of the coin, the representation of American urban centres from the same period. If we are to imagine that Taylor's driver and Wilson's mechanic fled some urban centre to take up their nomadic life criss-crossing the underground street-race circuit, it is worth considering exactly what was going on in Hollywood's urban cinescapes of 1971. It may come as no surprise that by-and-large, these films are no more optimistic than their highway-bound counterparts. The highest-grossing film of 1970, *Love Story* (dir. Arthur Hiller, Paramount Pictures), finds a move from Cambridge, Massachusetts to New York City coinciding with the diagnosis of the cancer that will slowly claim Ali MacGraw's character's life for the remainder of that film's running time. The second-highest-grossing film of that year, *Airport* (dir. George Seaton, Universal Pictures), finds airways under threat from a bomb-toting, downtrodden demolitions expert determined on furnishing his wife with his life insurance money after he blows himself up mid-flight. Of course, such menacing visions of the menacing side of American city life are not specific to the early 1970s: from Janet Gaynor's seduction by the deadly charms of the bustling metropolis in F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (Fox Film Corporation, 1927) to the seediest extremes of the *film noir* (*The Naked City* [dir. Jules Dassin, Universal Studios, 1948]), Hollywood films have often sounded cautionary notes about the dangers of urban life while simultaneously exalting in the glamour of the big city. What is more specific to the films of the early 1970s is the all-encompassing sense of decay, both architectural and moral, that accompanies urban settings of that era, and reaches out to strangle the protagonists of these films. In *Love Story*, this malevolence comes in the form of Ryan O'Neil's father Ray Milland, whose dominating patriarchy paralyses his son, cutting him off from the life

of privilege young Oliver Barrett IV enjoyed before falling in with the young woman from the wrong side of the tracks. In *Airport*, it is the suffocating pressure of urban life that drives D.O. Guerrero to undertake his suicidal pyrotechnic mission, while stifling bureaucracy on the ground threatens to speed his passage towards oblivion. Two particularly useful examples of the nihilistic representations of urban life circa 1971 come from two of the most commercially-successful films of that year, exemplary exponents of the violent cop cycle: *Dirty Harry* and *The French Connection*. A close study of these two films, their formal workings, the circumstances of their productions, and a re-evaluation of their critical reception will indicate that the violent cop cycle in fact works a similar furrow to the films of the post-*Easy Rider* youth-cult road movie cycle. Taken in tandem, these two cycles complicate contemporary approaches to the New Hollywood, and offer fresh perspectives on the way the United States saw itself reflected in the popular entertainment of 1971.

PART I: *Dirty Harry*

Dirty Harry begins with the psychopath calling himself Scorpio (Andy Robinson) using a sniper rifle to kill a young woman as she swims in a rooftop pool.² Scorpio leaves a note threatening more murders unless the city of San Francisco pays him \$100 000. “Dirty” Harry Callahan, a determined detective notorious for his occasionally heavy-handed methods, is assigned to the case after the city refuses to meet Scorpio’s demands, and is unwillingly paired with a new partner, the young Chico Gonzales (Reni Santoni). Meanwhile, a helicopter patrol manages to prevent Scorpio from taking his next victim, a Catholic priest, but the killer manages to slip away.

Harry and Chico patrol the streets in search of Scorpio, to no avail, as Harry manages to arrest a suicidal roof jumper by goading him into a physical confrontation. In the meantime, Scorpio claims another victim: a young African American child. Harry and Chico mount a rooftop stakeout in the hope of catching Scorpio, and while he does turn up as expected, he once again manages to narrowly elude capture. Scorpio sends a note to the police department informing them that he has kidnapped a fourteen year old girl, Ann Mary Deacon, and buried her alive. This time, the ransom is \$200 000. Harry agrees to play bagman on the pretext of delivering the blood money to Scorpio. In fact he intends to capture the killer. Scorpio runs Harry around town from public telephone to public telephone, before ambushing and beating him. Chico, who has been covertly covering Harry’s course, manages to save his partner, and is himself wounded in the process, while Harry manages to stab Scorpio in the thigh. Later that night, Harry tracks the wounded Scorpio to the

² Siegel would later mug that he originally considered Audie Murphy for the Scorpio role: “I was looking for a killer, and here’s the killer of all time, a war hero who had killed over 250 people... It would have been the easiest part of his life”. According to Siegel, the studio rejected the suggestion. See Don Siegel in Stuart Kaminsky, “Don Siegel”, *Take One*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (March-April 1971, pub. 2 June, 1973), p. 15.

villain's lair in the abandoned Kezar football Stadium. Harry shoots the fleeing Scorpio in the leg, and proceeds to grind his foot in the bullet wound, forcing the killer to reveal the location of the kidnapped girl. The police arrive at the location to find her already dead; indeed, Ann Mary Deacon has been dead the entire time.

The District Attorney decides to set Scorpio free, as Harry forced the confession from the malefactor by illicit means of torture, in turn denying the suspect his rights. Infuriated, Harry begins tailing Scorpio in his own time, convinced that it will only be a matter of time before he catches the villain committing another evil act. Scorpio responds by paying a man to savagely beat his face, and appears before the media, claiming his wounds are the result of police brutality on the part of Harry Callahan. Harry, meanwhile, pays a visit to his partner, Chico, recuperating in the hospital. Chico informs Harry that he will be leaving the police department to become a teacher.

Scorpio robs a liquor store, and steals the shop-keeper's gun, which he uses to hijack a school bus full of children. Scorpio demands the city provide him with a fully-fuelled, staffed jetliner to a destination of his choice, and threatens to begin executing the school-children if his requests are not met. Harry, defying orders from City Hall, leaps onto the bus as it passes under a bridge, and forces it off the road next to a gravel pit on the outskirts of San Francisco. Harry and Scorpio engage in a shootout, and Scorpio takes a child hostage. Harry disarms his opponent, and then goads Scorpio with the same routine he gave to a wounded bank robber at the outset of the film: did Harry expend six bullets, or only five? As Scorpio reaches for his gun, Harry fires, expending his last bullet, blasting his foe into the gulch. The film ends as Harry removes his San Francisco police star from its wallet, regards it, then casts it into the water, and walks away as the sound of sirens approaches.

Dirty Harry was the kind of star-making turn Eastwood needed as he attempted to broach a transition phase of his career. Having spent the last 15 years as one of the most identifiable stars to be associated with the western genre which was quickly falling out of favour amongst audiences and studio production rosters alike, Eastwood was understandably eager to recast his tough, monosyllabic screen persona in a different generic mould. His star-making turns in Sergio Leone's Man with No Name trilogy (*Per uno pugno di dollari/A Fistful of Dollars*, 1964, *Per qualche dollaro in più/For A Few Dollars More*, 1965 and *Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo/The Good, The Bad and the Ugly*, 1966) were not released in the United States until 1967 by United Artists, at which point Eastwood was already branching out into other genres: the war movie (*Where Eagles Dare* [dir. Brian G. Hutton, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968]), and musical (albeit with a western setting, and a disastrous mismatch at that: *Paint Your Wagon* [dir. Joshua Logan, Paramount Pictures, 1969]).

Eastwood's starring-turn of 1970, *Kelly's Heroes* (dir. Brian G. Hutton, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1970) misjudged its blend of World War II epic with comedy caper, as potential opportunities to pass a *M*A*S*H*-style cynical commentary on American involvement in Vietnam were lost amongst the broad comic performances of Don Rickles and Telly Savalas, which more accurately resembled those of mid-1960s ensemble comic escapades such as *It's A Mad Mad Mad Mad World* than the sombre turns of Altman's Korean War fable. The grim Eastwood, in the leading role as Private Kelly, looked uneasy on screen playing alongside the doped-out Donald Sutherland as an anachronistically hip (as in, hippie) tank commander, who provided the most memorable scenes of the film. Despite earning \$5 million at the box office, these takings looked fairly slender alongside the \$4 million budget the film demanded, and positively emaciated when compared to the \$48 million taken by *Love Story*, the highest grossing film of the same year. Tellingly, *Kelly's Heroes* would be

the final film to star Eastwood that was not produced through his own production company, Malpas.

Director Don Siegel began his Hollywood career in 1934 as a film librarian at Warner Bros. and eventually moved up the chain of command, graduating to assistant editor, head of insert department, and ultimately spending some time cutting montages.³ Siegel was ultimately admitted to the directorial chair on the Warner Bros. B-roster, beginning a prolific streak, turning in a steady stream of credits to his name, year in year out, as his relentless pace overshadowed a reputation for difficulty when it came to producers and studios.⁴ Siegel's career trajectory followed the workhorse model synonymous with Old Hollywood, content to work on a seemingly endless series of projects one after the other, directing two films on average a year throughout the 1950s, maintaining a steady pace, turning in cuts on time and on often meagre budgets. Where *The Killers* (Universal Pictures, 1964) or *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* (Allied Artists, 1956) may have been singled out for critical reappraisal decades later, Siegel's directorial efforts either side of the latter, *An Annapolis Story* (Allied Artists, 1955) and *Crime in the Streets* (Allied Artists, 1956) remain relative obscurities, and representative of the unobtrusive but well-constructed genre-fare which predominantly occupied his attentions.

Jim Kitses wrote in *Film Comment* in 1971 that "the French... consider Siegel to be Hollywood's most gifted filmmaker," a statement subsequently dismissed by Kitses on behalf of all Hollywood: "no-one really believes that kind of thing in this town".⁵ An increasingly radical Jean-Luc Godard, always a fan of Hollywood's B-movies, would declare Siegel to be one of his favourites, at the same time as he

³ Kaminsky, p. 10.

⁴ Jim Kitses, "Journal: LA", *Film Comment*, Vol. 7, Iss. 3 (Fall 1971), p. 2.

⁵ Ibid.

derided the action film form as inherently fascist.⁶ Such acclaim from French quarters prompted more bemusement from Siegel than exultation. So enmeshed was he in the Old Hollywood system of production that Siegel was unable or unwilling to engage with auteurist approaches to his body of work (or indeed, the political ramifications of some said films, a refusal which would return to haunt him with the release of *Dirty Harry*). In the aforementioned *Film Comment* article, Kitses relates an anecdote wherein Siegel was invited to the London National Film Theatre where a season of his films had been programmed to coincide with the completion of *Coogan's Bluff* (Universal Pictures, 1968). Siegel was surprised to find himself being addressed as an auteur director by members of the press, and despite being, “thrilled to find all his little action movies being taken seriously,” he “wasn’t much prepared to talk at conceptual levels, even suggesting he found the critical analysis overwhelming”.⁷ Siegel’s career precisely straddles the point of transition from Old Hollywood to New, and the associated rise of auteurist sentiment. Alan Lovell sees Siegel as particularly emblematic of key shifts in modes of Hollywood production over his decades at work:

Don Siegel’s career is embedded in two phases of the American film industry. The first phase, roughly the period between the middle 1930s and the early 1950s, was defined by the relative stability of the industry. The cinema was a dominant form of popular entertainment in developed industrial societies and a large part of that cinema was constituted by the American industry, which was accordingly a major economic enterprise, highly profitable and substantially capitalised...

The second phase, the period between the early 1950s and the present day, is defined by a radical instability caused by the cinema’s general decline as a

⁶ Anthony Chase, “The Strange Romance of *Dirty Harry* Callahan and Ann Mary Deacon”, *The Velvet Light Trap* (Fall 1976), p. 14.

⁷ Kitses, “Journal: LA”, *Film Comment*, p. 2.

major form of popular entertainment due to the development of television and other forms of leisure activity. This resulted in a decline in the number of films made, which inevitably affected the mass production, industrial organisation of the industry.⁸

Central to Siegel's second phase of work is his association with Clint Eastwood. As recounted in what is almost certainly an apocryphal tale in his autobiography, Siegel came to collaborate with Clint Eastwood due to a computer error at Universal, wherein the names of directors Alex Segal (*Joy in the Morning* [Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1965]) and Don Taylor (*Escape from the Planet of the Apes*, [Twentieth Century Fox, 1971]) were erroneously contracted to form Don Siegel, which prompted Eastwood's attentions towards Siegel's body of work when considering who should helm his first starring-role at Universal.⁹ The resultant film, *Coogan's Bluff*, is almost a prototype for *Dirty Harry*: a lean, no-nonsense thriller, with Eastwood in the title role as an Arizona deputy sheriff extraditing a killer back from New York. Eastwood's Coogan shares with Harry Callahan, and his earlier Man with No Name, a cool, monosyllabic temperament, allowing actions to speak louder than words, and the occasional sardonic remark to slip under the radar. *Coogan's Bluff* updated Eastwood's western persona to a modern-day setting, and finds its hero at home on the familiarly stark Arizona mesa, similar geographical terrain to that walked by Eastwood's earlier western roles. Coogan's cowboy boots and hat are imported wholesale to the incongruously contemporary New York setting, where Coogan travels, unfazed, to track his quarry through pool halls and multistorey apartment buildings. Tellingly, *Coogan's Bluff*, released one year before *Easy Rider*, does not attempt to stake its claim on a countercultural appeal in the way Hopper's film successfully did, but rather emphasises the straightness of the Coogan character

⁸ Alan Lovell, *Don Siegel: American Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1975), pp. 30-31.

⁹ Don Siegel, *A Siegel Film: An Autobiography* (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 294.

in opposition to the unhinged members of the counterculture he encounters.

Representations of the hippie/LSD subculture in *Coogan's Bluff* are regarded with a stern and detached eye, as a psychedelic night club becomes a quite literal stomping ground for Coogan, a long way from the dangerously alluring playground of mind-expanding delights that Hopper could have conceivably found in the same material. Countercultural characters in *Coogan's Bluff* are represented as mere ciphers, stripped of psychological realism in a way that Siegel would revisit with the deliberately under-drawn characterisations of *Dirty Harry*. Modest in its ambitions and scope, *Coogan's Bluff* was not a huge step up from the kind of television and western roles upon which Eastwood had built his name, and the B-movies on which Siegel usually found himself working. A \$3 million box-office taking represented a healthy return on production costs for Universal (but a long way from the \$26 million Columbia reaped from *Funny Girl* [dir. William Wyler] in the same year), and was enough to sufficiently satisfy the studio. Eastwood and Siegel, meanwhile, had forged a sufficient rapport to embrace the possibility of working together again.

The intervening two-years between *Coogan's Bluff* and *Dirty Harry* saw the release of four collaborations between Siegel and Eastwood. *Two Mules for Sister Sara* (Universal Pictures, 1970) saw Eastwood return to the western genre, teamed with Shirley MacLaine as a nun who may not be all that she seems. The two characters form a screwball-style partnership after Eastwood's outlaw rescues MacLaine's "nun" from bandits and then finds himself bound to protect her as she makes her way across the wasteland. As in *Kelly's Heroes*, the attempt to meld screwball comedy with a traditionally autonomous genre (in this case, the western) was not entirely successful, despite some memorable action set-pieces. Early 1971 saw the release of a more unorthodox collaboration between Siegel and Eastwood: *The Beguiled*. Adapted from Thomas P. Cullinan's 1966 novel, the screenplay was

rewritten several times amidst creative disagreements between director, producers, and star. The resultant film is every bit a product of the genre-blending vogue of the time, representing a particularly odd hybrid of forms: part period chamber drama, part Civil War epic, with a turn towards gothic horror in the third act. Eastwood plays a wounded Union soldier who is taken in by a Southern girls' boarding school, where his presence casts him and the inhabitants of the boarding house into a minefield of shifting alliances and improper sexual desires. The most effective moments of *The Beguiled* convey a Polanski-esque sense of disquiet, giving way to paranoia, then fully fledged terror, yet the film unsurprisingly comes across as uncertain of its meld of generic elements and shifts in tone. Its stifling sense of mood gives way steeply to mania as Eastwood falls down the stairs, and has his leg sawn off by a crazed Geraldine Page as punishment for his sexual transgressions.

Mis-marketed by Universal as a Civil War-era spaghetti western, *The Beguiled* failed to attract an audience in the United States, and one can only imagine what those rare viewers lured into the cinema on the strength of the Eastwood western brand would have made of the virile hero here playing a psycho-sexual predator rendered impotent while surrounded by malevolent underage girls. Siegel was convinced that *The Beguiled* would have been a success if played on the festival circuit, but Universal's release schedule precluded it from consideration at the major festivals; nevertheless, it went on to be a minor success in France.¹⁰

What *The Beguiled* shares with Eastwood's directorial debut, *Play Misty for Me* (Universal Pictures, 1971) is an almost pathological aversion to female sexual desire, whereby feminine sexuality is at once envisioned as alluring and repugnant, and a dangerous centre for disempowerment for the male protagonists. It is not much of a stretch to view both films as an expression of abject terror, consciously or

¹⁰ Siegel, p. 356.

otherwise, from the fundamentally masculine Eastwood and Siegel, to the looming shift in hierarchical power structures and the decline in male privilege suggested by the rise second-wave feminism. What is clear from a side-by-side comparison of the two films is that Eastwood's *Play Misty for Me* eschews the conscious shifting of generic lines of *The Beguiled*, instead strictly adhering to the generic template of the thriller. *The Beguiled*, on the other hand, is more successful at conveying spikes of atmosphere, and summoning a singular, enveloping sense of dread, even as it sags at times under the weight of its own portentousness. Siegel, in *Dirty Harry*, would turn away from the attempts to stitch together multiple genres with his early Eastwood films, and would return to a muscular genre cinema of his early career, with a thoroughly skeletal take on the detective genre.

Dirty Harry, as a project, had a difficult and lengthy gestation period before making its way onto the big screen. The original screenplay, written by Harry Julian and Rita M. Fink, was bought by Universal, where Steve McQueen briefly expressed interest, but never committed to the project.¹¹ The project reached further stages of development with Frank Sinatra proposed for the starring role under the direction of Irvin Kershner, a director with a cultivated sensibility who had had a hit the previous year with *Loving* (Columbia Pictures, 1970). The key creative figures had difficulty agreeing on the focus of the project, ordering four consecutive rewrites at the hands of different writers, including John Milius and Terrence Malick, fresh from the American Film Institute and working as a script doctor. Nevertheless, Kershner and Sinatra failed to agree on any of the screenplays presented to them. Frustrated by the lack of consensus, Sinatra dropped out of the project after sustaining a hand injury, and Kershner quickly followed suit. At this point, Clint Eastwood's manager, Jennings Lang, offered the starring role to Eastwood, in the hope of generating a

¹¹ Richard Schickel, audio commentary, *Dirty Harry* DVD, distributed by Warner Home Video, 2008.

package around the star. Eastwood agreed to star in the film if Siegel would direct it, in the process discarding the many re-writes and reinstating the Finks' original draft of the screenplay, which would be further re-worked by Dean Riesner, at Siegel's suggestion.¹²

Eastwood brought to *Dirty Harry* all of the ideological and cinematic baggage associated with his legacy as a star of the out-of-favour western genre.¹³ Yet Lovell also sees that the pairing, "was obviously very important for the maintenance and development of Siegel's career".¹⁴ The overpowering nature of Eastwood's stardom goes some way to explaining the forceful sense of agency and individuality his character exhibits (often interpreted as fascist). As Lovell notes, "there were certain artistic demands that Eastwood's star persona automatically made. As the biggest star in the American cinema he needed to play a dominant character in any film he appeared in".¹⁵ And yet despite Eastwood's tendency to overshadow *Dirty Harry* before the film even begins, the film begins not with him, but with another image: that of a San Francisco police star, which will also appear at the end of the film. *Dirty Harry* opens with this star superimposed onto a close-up shot of a memorial monument. The camera tracks down the list of names of San Francisco police officers who were killed in the line of duty: a title onscreen dedicates *Dirty Harry* to their memory. The sentiment of this sequence, deliberately sanctioned as a self-contained moment for serious contemplation, is at odds with the sequence immediately following it, as the martial tones of Lalo Schiffrin's score give way to twitchy jazz drum breaks as the psychopath Scorpio sights his victim in a rooftop swimming pool through his sniper rifle scope, allowing his gaze to linger on her body before he assassinates her. Siegel's manipulation of film style in the realisation of this opening

¹² Siegel, p. 358.

¹³ For a detailed consideration of the ways in which stardom and ideology are interlinked, see Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979).

¹⁴ Lovell, p. 36.

¹⁵ Ibid.

sequence builds a palpable sense of suspense, heightened by the shift to the insistent, intermittently discordant jazz soundtrack. The wide-angle lens shot which grotesquely distorts Scorpio's rifle even as it obscures his face, and the point of view shot through the telescopic sight forces the audience to share the killer's field of view as he decides whether or not to take the life of his victim. Release from this build-up of tension comes when Scorpio does pull the trigger, with a quick cut to a medium shot of the woman, gasping for breath, bullet hole punched through her shoulder as she struggles to keep her head above water, no longer a distant figure regarded through the remove of the telescopic sight, but a human being of flesh and blood who is now bleeding out into the swimming pool water.

The tension between the two opening sequences, the reverential contemplation of San Francisco's fallen police officers, and the visual excitement of witnessing Scorpio's act of violence, invokes the dichotomy of material which Siegel will continue to play with throughout *Dirty Harry*. As Alan Lovell observes, "*Dirty Harry* is organised formally on the basis of creating tension out of an anticipation of violence... [as] the general narrative interest of the film depends on both maintaining and delaying this anticipation of a reciprocal act of violence".¹⁶ More broadly speaking, central to *Dirty Harry* is concern for a police force grown corpulently ineffective under the weight of its own bureaucracy, and having its ability to uphold the law retracted at other levels of government. By the time the film comes to its end, as Harry withdraws his police star from its leather wallet and regards it at the edge of the gravel pit dam, we see it very differently from the same star which opened the film.

Siegel, throughout *Dirty Harry*, plays games with his audience, deliberately manipulating cinematic and narrative form to evoke a specific set of reactions. Many

¹⁶ Lovell, p. 39.

critics who took issue with *Dirty Harry* did so on the grounds that it is a manipulative film, which it is, but perhaps no more so than any other film made in the continuity-based Hollywood storytelling style, which employs a series of formal mechanisms to evoke viewer identification with the characters and situations depicted. Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson offer the most concise definition of Classical Hollywood style as one that, “strives to conceal its artifice through techniques of continuity and ‘invisible storytelling.’”¹⁷ This definition neatly coincides with Ric Gentry’s description of the cinematic style of *Dirty Harry* as one “strip[ped]... of all stylisation to better view the harsh realism of the story”.¹⁸ Furthermore, Alan Lovell notes, “formally, Siegel’s films are unobtrusive... Siegel’s formal strategies are always simple ones, but their simplicity is the mark of an artist with a highly developed sense of form”.¹⁹ Writing of Siegel’s *The Killers*, Lovell makes a number of observations about his formal technique that would be equally applicable to *Dirty Harry*: “Siegel’s visual style is characteristically simple and uncluttered... [his] set-ups are usually straightforward ones with the camera seeing the action straight on - in loose close or medium shots. This means that the action is always placed in a context, which is important because of Siegel’s concern for the social setting”.²⁰ In *Dirty Harry*, Siegel trains his unambiguous mode of cinematic storytelling upon a considerably more troublesome moral landscape.

Superficially, the moral universe *Dirty Harry* inhabits is strictly two tone. Scorpio is the kind of villain that strikes fear into the heart of civilised society. Killing indiscriminately and without compassion, purely in pursuit of personal profit, and displaying a piteous cowardice whenever his own safety is placed in peril,

¹⁷ Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, p. 3.

¹⁸ Ric Gentry, “Director Clint Eastwood: Attention to Detail and Involvement for the Audience”, *Millimeter* (December 1980), reprinted in Robert E. Kapsis and Kathie Coblenz (eds.), *Clint Eastwood Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), p. 64.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 14.

²⁰ Lovell, p. 27.

Scorpio receives no psychological development or expository illumination to reveal the motivations behind his murderous actions beyond a despicably hedonistic psychopathy. Siegel has stated that “I took the situation as it existed without going into the *raison d’être* for the killer’s action. I wasn’t interested in his background. All I was interested in was that he was a killer. Why he became a killer (the fact that his parents broke up when he was at an early age, or something like that) was left behind, because it represented dead footage for me, at least in a picture of this type”.²¹

Nevertheless, there are clues: Scorpio is calculatedly characterised to antagonise the straight-laced Callahan, and, vicariously, the viewer: sporting long hair and bell-bottomed trousers, Scorpio spouts the inflammatory epithets of the counterculture (“pig,” “fascist”), while leering over children in a playground and dancers in a stripclub in consecutive sequences. Scorpio’s off-colour language (threatening to kill a Catholic priest or a “nigger”) and appropriation of a peace-symbol belt buckle offer something to upset the sensibilities of every viewer. Peter Lev says of Scorpio’s appropriation of the peace symbol that, “Siegel seems to have outsmarted himself”.²²

Of Siegel’s comments on the matter in the interview with Stuart Kamisky in *Take One*, Lev writes that:

Siegel describes creating visual cues to suggest that Scorpio is a mentally ill Vietnam vet. Siegel thinks that the peace symbol belt buckle is a symbol of self-delusion: ‘It seems to me that it may remind us that no matter how vicious a person is, when he looks at himself in the mirror, he’s not capable of seeing the truth about himself...’; Scorpio ‘really feels that the world is wrong and he is right, that he really stands for and believes in peace.’ This psychological construction is ingenious, but visual symbols tend to diverge from predefined, unitary meanings. Many commentaries on *Dirty Harry* see

²¹ Siegel in Lovell, p. 60.

²² Peter Lev, *Conflicting Visions* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000), p. 36.

the peace symbol on the belt buckle as a simpler construct, and identification of Scorpio with the hippies and the antiwar movement. The attempt at psychological depth thus becomes an index of social conflict.²³

The presence of Scorpio's peace symbol belt buckle, and the tension between signifier and signified, recalls Hopper's similarly murky play with loaded iconography in *Easy Rider*. Richard Schickel sees a more practical application in Scorpio's wardrobe choice, more closely aligned with Siegel's stated intention, "the irony being that this creep would, of course, in San Francisco at that time, use a peace symbol as a kind of disguise, associate himself with the 'good folks' when he's manifestly a bad folk".²⁴ The confusion created by Scorpio's belt buckle is one example of the way in which *Dirty Harry* fails to establish a clear moral position on the characters and situations it depicts. The representation of its archetypical, one-dimensional antagonist and protagonist further complicate, rather than clarify, this central sense of ambiguity.

Harry Callahan is realised in equally limited terms. A typically deadpan Eastwood performance, occasionally peppered with his trademark cynical wisecracks, Callahan cuts a single-minded, purposeful figure. The screenplay provides limited exposition for its protagonist, offering just two hints of backstory. The first of these sees Harry mentioning in passing that he grew up in the same Russian Hill neighbourhood as the African American orderly who patches the bullet hole in Callahan's leg; the jocular nature of their conversation implies a long acquaintance.²⁵

²³ Lev, pp. 36-37.

²⁴ Schickel, audio commentary.

²⁵ The fact that Callahan cheerfully fraternises with the African American nurse was identified by at least one critic as a cynical attempt to toss a bone to viewers who were offended by the preceding sequence, in which Harry blasted several black bank robbers (Chase, "The Strange Romance...", p.17). In fact, Siegel himself admits as much in his autobiography when he says that the orderly scene was, "important... to show our audience that Harry was *not* a bigot... I had to let the audience know that Harry killed the bank robbers because they were bank robbers, *not* because they were black" (Siegel, pp. 369-70).

Clearly, the insertion of the cheerful scene of convivial interracial interaction immediately after Callahan dispatches the African American bandits was not sufficient to smooth over the problem of

The second exploration of Callahan's past comes later in the movie, when he explains to the wife of the wounded Chico Gonzales that he himself is a widower, his wife the victim of a hit run drink driving accident, the implication being that Callahan never recovered from the trauma of this incident. These expository stretches, far from fleshing out the rigidly uncharacterised Harry Callahan, function more as necessary cogs in the tightly wound narrative machinery of *Dirty Harry*. It is necessary for the audience to know that Harry has no wife, even if only in passing, in order to explain how he can so obsessively and suicidally become bent on his pursuit of Scorpio, without becoming enmeshed in the extraneous emotional territory of spousal obligation/love/protection/responsibility. Harry Callahan is a man without an identity beyond his occupation. Richard Schickel points out that Callahan "really has no life beyond being a cop," and that, "we never get to see where Harry Callahan lives," speculating that, "we're left to imagine that it's not a whole lot nicer than Scorpio's pad," the decrepit lair in the caretaker's shack of the disused Kezar Stadium.²⁶ Schickel observes that, "there is only one thing on God's good green earth that Harry Callahan can do, and that is to be a cop" and yet, "he is, in the context of the movie, a rebel. A rebel against bureaucracy that hinders his law enforcement activities, slows him down".²⁷

The figure of the rebel is one that is far more likely to spring to mind when considering the free-living youth-cult road movie cycle than it is in consideration of that instrument of authoritarianism personified, Harry Callahan. At first glance, it is

race in *Dirty Harry* for Anthony Chase. The problem remains that at some point in the production of the film the decision was made that the first adversaries to be dispatched by Callahan would be the (exclusively) black band of bank robbers. Siegel, as always, offers no overt value judgement on the actions depicted, but the image of a white man shooting at a group of black men, once seen, stirs certain connotations in the mind of the viewer, which are not easily dismissed, even as Callahan later winkingly embraces the litany of racial epithets attributed to him by his supervisor (limeys, micks, hebes, dagos, polacks, spics etc.) in the hazing of his young Latino partner Chico: Harry and, vicariously, Siegel, it seems, want to have their cake and eat it too.

It is worth noting that no similar attempts are made to conceal "Popeye" Doyle's racism in *The French Connection*, which revels flamboyantly in the bigotry of the central protagonist.

²⁶ Schickel, audio commentary.

²⁷ Ibid.

fair to assume that Callahan occupies a closer position on the political spectrum to the gun-toting duck hunters who murderously conclude *Easy Rider* than to Billy and Wyatt themselves, who aesthetically have more in common with the long-haired, flared trousered, peace symbol sporting Scorpio. That said, even the most fearful of conservative commentators could not conflate the harmlessly stoned Wyatt and Billy with the psychotically unhinged Scorpio. Appraising the protagonists on purely aesthetic grounds, Eastwood's Harry Callahan shares some similarities with Fonda's Wyatt: equally tall, lithe, and shaggy haired (an image Eastwood cultivated in the years between Leone's spaghetti westerns and *Dirty Harry*'s cinematic arrival, as his hair grew out, and rugged stubble was pared back to lengthening sideburns; despite his timelessly shabby cheap suit, *Dirty Harry* looks unmistakably 1971), both characters also share a detached temperament to an extent. It is important to recall that regardless of where we might situate their respective films with regard to their politics, both films share key sequences where the protagonists stand high atop landmarks and gaze enigmatically into the distance. For Wyatt, this moment comes in the hippie commune, and offers a moment of internalised existential crisis, as he decides to retreat from the hand of friendship extended by the hippies, and throws in his lot with Billy's ill-fated trip to New Orleans. Harry Callahan faces a similar moment of personal crisis with the discovery of the body of Ann Mary Deacon, the teenage victim of Scorpio who Harry was unable to save, despite his frantic efforts. In a moody pre-dawn sequence, Harry stares out to sea, backlit by the misty San Francisco bay, as the girl's body is exhumed. The combination of spectacular scenery and backlit human figures, low key music, the surreal visual element provided by the mist, and Harry's wordless witness to this grim parade, invest the scene with a quality of lyricism quite unlike the ruthless utility of style that Siegel employs elsewhere, and coming in direct contrast to the heightened hyper-realism of Harry's deceptively

climactic apprehension of Scorpio at Kezar stadium in the preceding sequence. Taken outside of the context of *Dirty Harry*, and setting aside the constructed cinematic persona of Clint Eastwood, the exhumation of Ann Mary Deacon could comfortably be inserted into the archetypical New Hollywood film, dwelling upon twin sensations of failure and aimlessness in a prolonged moment of ellipsis, aestheticised through a lyrical cinematographic eye. At this moment, we find the perfect ending for the New Hollywood version of *Dirty Harry*: humiliated by his failure to effectively protect and serve, shouldering the guilt for the death of the innocent victim, the fascist cop experiences the annihilation of his id and is cut adrift in the universe on a misty morning before the Golden Gate bridge. Fade out.

The problem with *Dirty Harry* is the film fades back in at that point, and, worse yet, returns with a sequence that for many observers displays the full audaciousness of the film's political sensibilities. The district attorney calls in Harry and informs him that Scorpio's confession was illegally extracted under torture meaning that he cannot be charged and must be released. Even more inflammatorily, the DA is accompanied by a Berkeley law professor (echoing Harry's revulsion upon discovering that his new partner Chico is not only a college graduate, but a *sociology* major) who invokes the Escobedo and Miranda rulings of 1964 and 1966 respectively, legislating on the rights of criminal suspects under police interrogation.²⁸ The reference by name to these high profile cases is an unusually contemporary move for a genre movie such as *Dirty Harry*, piercing the fantasy bubble of the fictional narrative world, and risking striking a reactionary tone. Chase writes of the political implications of this sequence that, "Harry Callahan pays a price

²⁸ Joe Street sees the selection of *Dirty Harry*'s San Francisco location as consistent with Siegel and Eastwood's needling of liberal sensibilities, given that city's role at the forefront of progressive and countercultural causes throughout the 1960s and 1970s, although this overlooks the fact that earlier drafts were in fact set in New York, and that it was Eastwood who suggested the shift of location as a matter of convenience given he lived in Northern California. See Joe Street, "Dirty Harry's San Francisco", *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, Vol. 5, Iss. 1 (June 2012), pp. 1-21.

for accomplishing an act surely no one would question yet which a liberal mayor, a permissive police department and judicial system, and a decadent society had neither the guts nor the masculine resolve to see through to the end”.²⁹ Pauline Kael, in her negative review of the film, found cause for concern in *Dirty Harry*’s portrayal of “the legal protections... that a weak, liberal society gives its criminals”.³⁰ Siegel would later deny the validity of even attempting such a reading of the film, saying, “not once throughout *Dirty Harry* did Clint and I have a political discussion... I can’t understand why, when a film is made purely for entertainment, it should be criticised on a political basis”.³¹ In a recently unearthed, unpublished interview with Eastwood conducted by Paul Nelson for *Rolling Stone*, the star calls accusations of fascism levelled at the film, “bullshit,” specifically invoking a comparison with *The French Connection*:

The other cop film of that year, *The French Connection*, for some reason it didn’t stir people on that level. It seemed to be more straight ahead - the guy solving the case. Though Gene [Hackman] was terrific in it, he was a different kind of cop. People didn’t seem to associate him with any kind of cause or any kind of crusade, whereas *Dirty Harry* was misinterpreted as being a right-wing crusader or a minuteman or something like that, when he wasn’t that at all. He was a man with mixed feelings about law and order and the job he was doing.³²

Nevertheless, his ambivalent relationship with violence throughout his early acting career would be a point of fascination and revision for Eastwood the director from as early as his directorial debut, *Play Misty For Me*. Through such films as *The Outlaw*

²⁹ Chase, “The Strange Romance...”, p.17.

³⁰ Pauline Kael, “Saint Cop”, *The New Yorker* (15 January 1972), reprinted in *Deeper Into Movies* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), p. 386.

³¹ Siegel, p. 373.

³² Clint Eastwood in Kevin Avery (ed.), *Conversations with Clint: Paul Nelson’s Lost Interviews with Clint Eastwood 1979-1983* (New York, London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), p. 76.

Josey Wales (Warner Bros., 1976) and *Unforgiven* (Warner Bros., 1992), Eastwood can be seen discarding his monosyllabic, cigar chomping, gun toting persona in favour of pained penitence and social awareness, to eventually win recognition from the Academy. It is fair to say that critics such as Roger Ebert, who cautiously rejected Eastwood's misanthropic triumvirate of *The Beguiled*, *Play Misty for Me* and *Dirty Harry*, could not have predicted the reinvention that would transform the poster boy for authoritarian violence into a liberal rallying-point for the critical establishment in decades to come.

To return to *Dirty Harry*, and the narrative turning point in Siegel's film, as Harry is reprimanded for his treatment of Scorpio, and the killer is set free: in the eyes of Dirty Harry, this is a manifestly unjust failure of the law. The legal system has protected criminal rather than victim, leaving Harry, the last committed lawman in town, no choice but to go to extreme lengths in order to keep the inhabitants of San Francisco safe from Scorpio. Leaving aside the political ramifications of this plot point, Scorpio's release is significant within the generic machinery of the cop film. As Lovell indicates, "the interest of a film like *Dirty Harry* is not exclusively ideological. There is another level of interest provided by the formal characteristics of the film and the problems these set up".³³ In a narrative sense, the archetypal nature of the representation of hero and villain has already been established: Scorpio, as villain, is presented as a figure of pure evil, perpetrator of impulsive acts of malevolence, exaggerated to an almost cartoonish extent. Kael defines this treatment of "crime... [as] medieval..., as evil, without specific causes or background".³⁴ But as Schickel points out, Harry Callahan too is a character granted only the most perfunctory of backgrounds. Any viewer identification, then, comes as a result of the charismatic star power of Eastwood, the appeal of the shared memory of his screen

³³ Lovell, p. 44.

³⁴ Kael, "Saint Cop", *Deeper Into Movies*, p. 386.

persona that carries across from his past roles, and the satisfaction of his occasional wisecracks that offer the only moments of levity in a markedly grim film. Certainly, no attempt is made to allow the audience to identify with the reprehensible Scorpio. But whether or not an audience can identify with Harry Callahan is equally unclear. Siegel, like Hellman in *Two-Lane Blacktop*, likes to keep his audience at arm's length from the action, preferring to allow his movie to unfold in wide shots and long takes, with a minimum of editing breaks during dialogue sequences. So if the formal mechanisms and characterisations of *Dirty Harry* fail to permit identification with the titular cop, then the only remaining point of accessibility is with Eastwood as star, and all of the accompanying baggage of his cinematic legacy circa 1971 looms large over *Dirty Harry*. Critical polemics against *Dirty Harry* assume that the audience condones the actions of Harry Callahan, but given the limited opportunities for identification with its protagonist, and Siegel's uncluttered directorial approach, it is unclear where Siegel expects the affections of the audience to reside. In his defence of the film, Siegel writes, "if I do a film about a murderer, it doesn't mean I condone murder. If I do a film about a hard-nosed cop, of course it doesn't mean I condone all of his actions".³⁵ To this end, the representation of Scorpio's antagonist is as simplistic as the critical line that the presence of Eastwood invites the potential for the film being co-opted by lunkhead fascists. There is an undertone of cultural condescension when Kael writes in her review that, "the movie was cheered and applauded by Puerto Ricans in the audiences, and they jeered – as they were meant to

³⁵ Siegel, p. 373.

According to Peter Bogdanovich, Don Siegel was not necessarily as naively unaware of the ramifications of *Dirty Harry* as he would pretend to be amidst the storm of critical disdain. In his book *Who the Devil Made It*, Bogdanovich recalls attending an early preview of the film with Siegel: 'I don't know *what* people are going to think of this,' Don Siegel said in a tone of hushed conspiracy as he greeted Cybill Shepherd and me for an early private screening of *Dirty Harry*. He thought all his liberal friends would disown him because of the picture's persuasive portrayal of how difficult it has become for police to apprehend criminals.

See Peter Bogdanovich, *Who the Devil Made It: Conversations with Legendary Film Directors* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), p. 720.

– when the maniac whined and pleaded for his legal rights”.³⁶ Such intellectual value judgements on the apolitical (at best), muddled, or downright manipulative (at worst) nature of mass entertainment were not new in 1971, nor have they gone away in the intervening decades. First and foremost, Siegel’s film functions as mass entertainment, as generic vehicle for its star, and steadfastly delivers on the expectations of that genre, perhaps to its own peril. This was dangerously unfashionable territory in the New Hollywood of 1971.

The generic workings of *Dirty Harry* play out in a very single-minded fashion: the first half of the film establishes Harry Callahan as the “good” cop, and Scorpio as the “bad” villain. So bad, in fact, that under no circumstances can the moral universe of *Dirty Harry* permit him to walk free. The narrative twists and turns of the film continually bring Scorpio tantalisingly close to capture, only to have him escape by a hair’s breadth time and time again, either through some failure of Harry’s, the incompetence of fellow officers, or, finally, the protection of the law itself. There is nothing mysterious about how these sequences deliver on their generic satisfactions of tension, the heightening of suspense, followed by release, and repeat. Schickel notes that, “there is a steady build up, in this movie, of frustration, which obviously begins to take its toll on Harry... We are talking about a guy moving from police routine to personal obsession in the way he deals with crimes”.³⁷ Here lies a fundamental difference between Fonda’s Wyatt and Eastwood’s Callahan: where we get the impression that Wyatt will coolly stand by no matter what events surround him, content so long as he has a joint in his mouth and the wind in his hair, the occasional twitch across Harry’s face belies the apoplexy simmering beneath the surface. As with many 1970s (anti)heroes, circumstances conspire to draw Harry Callahan into a fatalistic series of events, but where Bobby Dupea and the drag racers

³⁶ Kael, “Saint Cop”, *Deeper Into Movies*, p. 387.

³⁷ Schickel, audio commentary.

of *Two-Lane Blacktop* are resigned to their fates, Callahan can only take so much before he is driven to action. His breaking point drives him to the terminal, cathartic action of removing the figurative thorn in his side by killing Scorpio. Here, decisively, Clint Eastwood and Don Siegel do away with the aimless malaise of the New Hollywood, as Harry Callahan purposefully takes aim at Scorpio and blows him away. Stridently individualist in its application of Eastwood's star, *Dirty Harry* offers a decisive hero singlehandedly taking action.³⁸

The concluding gesture of the film, as Harry Callahan discards his badge, could be taken as a right-wing response to the failure of the law to see out justice, where only vigilantism has succeeded to subdue Scorpio. It could also be read as a concluding concession to the spirit of the times, a final gesture of refusal on the part of Harry Callahan who, having stepped outside the law one last time, sheds his identity as police officer; Lovell views this moment as one wherein, "Harry accepts the general logic of his stance, which is complete isolation".³⁹ In this embrace of isolation, Harry steps into the same unknown territory that Bobby Dupea heads for at the end of *Five Easy Pieces*: perhaps this is the point at which we find Dirty Harry hitching a ride with a logging truck to Alaska, or growing his hair and hopping on a motorcycle bound for New Orleans. In contrast, *Dirty Harry* would eventually be co-opted in the post-*Jaws*, post-*Star Wars* franchising model of endless sequelisation, as Harry Callahan would be trotted out at lengthening intervals for four sequels, each of

³⁸ Yet even here in the seemingly straightforward application of Eastwood as star, Siegel's fondness for ambiguity again rears its head. Throughout *Dirty Harry*, Siegel offers numerous instances of doubling and repetition between Harry and his adversary Scorpio, suggesting that Harry's obsessive, unhinged need to detain and destroy his foe is not dissimilar from the psychopathic urge that spurs on Scorpio's depraved acts. For instance, the film makes use of a masking motif when occupying both characters' points of view, first when Scorpio looks through the telescopic sight of his sniper rifle, and later when Harry observes from the rooftop using binoculars. Later, Harry and Scorpio have their first physical confrontation under the giant cross at Mount Davidson. As both characters are wounded, Siegel deliberately cuts between their identical actions as they get up off the ground, visually suggesting their doubling. Lovell says of this tendency that, "the place of the law in the film is further qualified by the similarities that exist between Harry and the killer... In a large measure Harry embodies the same kind of isolated savagery as the killer does". See Lovell, p. 43.

³⁹ Lovell, p. 44.

which resets the quarrelsome detective at the beginning of a new case, business as usual. The alternative trajectory for Dirty Harry may be glimpsed at in *The Gauntlet* (dir. Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros., 1977), as Eastwood plays a broken, alcoholic detective, against whom the world, and the police force itself, has well and truly turned against.

Joe Street sees in *Dirty Harry's* final sequence, "that the film has left modern America behind... there is now a complete absence of law and order in the Scorpio-Callahan relationship".⁴⁰ Implicitly, we can extrapolate from Street's statement a return to the iconography of the western, and a triumphalist embrace of natural law. Finally, and perhaps most appropriately, we can take the final gesture of *Dirty Harry* as a knowing nod to the similar conclusion of *High Noon*, and a wink through time and cinematic space from one icon of the out-of favour western genre to another, as Siegel returned to the generic fold in which he built his career, with a nostalgic look back from the unfashionably generic *Dirty Harry* adrift in the complexities of Hollywood 1971 to a simpler time. Beyond this, to declare the film as fascist is to assume that it condones Harry's actions, or expects the audience to identify with his character - a proposition problematised by Eastwood's charismatic star status and both his and director Siegel's affiliations with outmoded genre films at a moment when critical tastes were in a state of flux.

⁴⁰ Street, "*Dirty Harry's* San Francisco", p. 9.

PART II: *The French Connection*

Eastwood's Harry Callahan was not the only violent, unhinged detective to stalk the cinema screens of 1971. Two months before the release of Siegel's film, Gene Hackman had made a seismic impression upon critics and audiences alike with his portrayal of Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle in director William Friedkin's *The French Connection*. There is no obvious parallel to *The French Connection* in the New Hollywood moment. More completely than *Easy Rider* or *Vanishing Point*, *The French Connection* melds cinematic spectacle with aesthetic self-consciousness; like those two films, its attempts to simultaneously embrace and deviate from generic conventions ultimately delivers it into a space of narrative incoherence.

The French Connection had a prolonged gestation before reaching screens in October 1971. The project originated in the exploits of New York Detectives Eddie Egan and Sonny Grosso, whose investigation led to the interception in 1961 of the largest drug shipment ever detected on US soil, uncovering 50 kilograms of heroin being smuggled by a conspiracy of French gangsters and New York mafiosi. In 1969, author Robin Moore published a written account of the case under the title *The French Connection*. Moore's previous novel *The Green Berets* had been turned into a film in 1968 (dir. Ray Kellogg, John Wayne and an uncredited Mervyn LeRoy, Warner Bros.-Seven Arts), one of the first Hollywood films to openly depict the American war in Vietnam. This singlemindedly jingoistic John Wayne vehicle was tonally very much at odds with the changing of the guard afoot in Hollywood at the time. Similarly, Moore's *French Connection* book is very much of the pulpy no-frills true-crime variety, long on procedural detail and glorification of policework, and short on any attempts to humanise or render sympathetic its heroes, or the investigation which concerns them. None of this suggests a lineage that would beget one of the touchstone films of the New Hollywood.

From the earliest stages of his career, *French Connection* director William Friedkin would alternate between populist and more serious works. Friedkin began working in the mailroom of a local television station in his native Chicago at 16, and graduated to directing live television two years later.⁴¹ Early television credits include an episode of *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* (NBC, 1965), the *Time Life: March of Time* documentary newsreel series and *Pro Football: Mayhem on a Sunday Afternoon* (ABC, 1965). That same year, Friedkin moved to Los Angeles, where he directed three features that are now largely forgotten: Sonny and Cher's failed attempt at Beatles-style mania, *Good Times* (Columbia Pictures, 1967), which offered a similarly uneven pastiche of film genres a year before Rafelson's *Head, The Night they Raided Minsky's* (United Artists, 1968), a period burlesque musical, notable for blending documentary footage with the dramatic material in frenzied montage, and a dour adaptation of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (Continental Distributing, 1968). Friedkin's fourth film, *The Boys in the Band* (1970), proved to be his breakout. Also set during a birthday party, and betraying its stagey origins in its employment of a single location for the entirety of its running time, *The Boys in the Band* was one of the first American studio films to depict homosexuality in a clear-eyed, even-handed manner. These last two films, in the light of the veneer of critical respectability that accompanies theatrical adaptations for the screen, suggested that Friedkin's directorial career was heading towards one well-established, middlebrow cinematic tradition. Friedkin would later tell Peter Biskind how he observed a widening gulf opening between the films he was directing at that time, and the films he *wanted* to make: "I had this epiphany that what we were doing wasn't making films to hang in the fucking Louvre. We were making films to entertain people and if they didn't do

⁴¹ Gerald R. Barrett, "William Friedkin Interview", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (October 1975), reprinted in Elise M. Walker and David T. Johnson (eds.), *Conversations with Directors: An Anthology of Interviews from Literature/Film Quarterly* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2008), p. 15.

that then they didn't fulfil their primary purpose".⁴² On the cusp of joining the ranks of the New Hollywood auteurs, Friedkin was experiencing a realignment of his relationship with his cinema that contrasted starkly with the loftier artistic ambitions of the Rafelsons or Hoppers of the period.

Given the kinds of films for which he was known at this point, Friedkin seems an unlikely choice to direct the adaptation of Moore's *French Connection* novel, the rights for which had been purchased by producer Phil D'Antoni.⁴³ D'Antoni, who had just enjoyed the biggest hit of his career with his first feature film production credit, *Bullitt*, was keen to bring a similarly down-at-heel approach to his new acquisition. D'Antoni actively courted Friedkin on the strength of the director's 1965 television documentary *The People vs. Paul Crump*, which offered an unapologetically gritty perspective on urban Chicago life in its re-enactment of a botched robbery and shooting of a white security guard, for which the young African American Paul Crump was sentenced to death, despite his protestations of innocence. D'Antoni felt that Friedkin's sensibility was a perfect match for the producer's new property, and sent him a copy of Moore's book, which Friedkin claims he, "couldn't read... I only knew from the dust jacket what it was about".⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Friedkin flew out to New York and met the real Eddie Egan and Sonny Grosso. After accompanying the detectives on actual drug busts for research purposes, Friedkin agreed to direct the film on the condition that he be allowed to oversee a significant reworking of Moore's book during the adaptation process.⁴⁵ D'Antoni commissioned several screenplays for *The French Connection*. Alex Jacobs, who adapted Richard Stark's similarly procedural hardboiled novel *The Hunter* (1962) for John Boorman as *Point*

⁴² Biskind, *Easy Riders Raging Bulls*, p. 203.

⁴³ *Making the Connection: The Untold Stories of The French Connection* (2001), *The French Connection* Special Edition DVD, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2000.

⁴⁴ William Friedkin interview, *The Poughkeepsie Shuffle: Tracing The French Connection* (dir. Russell Leven, BBC, 2000), *The French Connection* special edition DVD, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2000.

⁴⁵ *The Poughkeepsie Shuffle*.

Blank (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1967), submitted the first draft, and Robert E. Thomspson, writer of the grim depression-era dance-a-thon *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (dir. Sydney Pollack, Cinerama Releasing Corporation, 1969), also wrote a draft, but both were rejected by Friedkin.⁴⁶ D'Antoni suggested that they might get an appropriately street-level perspective from the young new writer Ernest Tidyman, who had penned the as-yet unreleased *Shaft* (dir. Gordon Parks Jr., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1971), with which D'Antoni and Friedkin were familiar by reputation. Friedkin and D'Antoni took a more active involvement in Tidyman's writing process. D'Antoni recounts that the three men,

Would meet every morning from nine to twelve in Billy's apartment, and we would discuss, step by step, scene by scene, page by page [the plot of the film]... Then Ernest would go off at twelve noon, write the pages, and the next morning we would meet again, read the pages, correct them, and go on to the next thing.⁴⁷

The resulting plot of the film version of *The French Connection* retained only basic elements from Moore's factual account of the actual police investigation. Eddie "Popeye" Egan and Sonny "Cloudy" Grosso were renamed Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle and Buddy "Cloudy" Russo respectively (thus rendering the Cloudy pun redundant), while villains Patsy Fuca, Jean Jehan and Jacques Anglevin became Sal Boca, Alain Charnier and Henri Deveraux. The basic conceit of police surveillance uncovering and ultimately breaking the conspiracy to import heroin from France to the United States concealed within an automobile remained, but much of the procedural detail of Moore's novel was eliminated, and entire episodes of narrative were invented as Tidyman, Friedkin and D'Antoni re-fictionalised Moore's novel.

⁴⁶ *The Poughkeepsie Shuffle*.

⁴⁷ Phil D'Antoni interview, *Making the Connection*.

Tidyman's screenplay was rejected by numerous studios. After being picked up and subsequently dropped by National General, Friedkin hurriedly completed *The Boys in the Band* while *The French Connection* was rewritten and repackaged to shop to different studios.⁴⁸ Despite D'Antoni's recent success with *Bullitt*, Friedkin represented an unknown quantity as director, and mild acclaim for his last two theatrical adaptations nevertheless inspired no confidence that he could capably handle the shift to directing a thriller such as *French Connection*, replete with elaborate action setpieces. Richard Zanuck at Fox, on the other hand, was immediately drawn to the project, interested in what a director such as Friedkin would bring to such material.⁴⁹ Fox continued to suffer from financial troubles associated with disastrous production decisions of the previous decade, when it invested heavily in elaborate musicals such as *Doctor Dolittle* (dir. Richard Fleischer, 1967) and *Star!* (dir. Robert Wise, 1968). Much as with the deal made with Richard C. Sarafian on *Vanishing Point*, Zanuck offered Friedkin and D'Antoni a relatively meagre budget of \$1.5 million in exchange for considerable creative freedom, which the director relished.⁵⁰

Casting the film would prove as difficult as writing it had been. Friedkin had been impressed by Peter Boyle's starring performance as a hippie-slaying hardhat in *Joe*, and offered him the lead as "Popeye". Boyle turned down the part, saying he was more interested in pursuing romantic leads.⁵¹ Television star Jackie Gleason was also considered for the role, but the studio didn't want him, long memories stretching back to the troubled financing of his Chaplin-referencing vanity project *Gigot* (dir. Gene Kelly, 1962).⁵² The real life Eddie Egan wanted Paul Newman or Rod Taylor to play

⁴⁸ William Friedkin, "Anatomy of a Chase", *Take One*, Vol. 3, No. 6 (July-August 1971, pub. 4 October 1972), p. 25.

⁴⁹ *The Poughkeepsie Shuffle*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Friedkin, *Making the Connection*.

⁵² *Ibid.*

him, and Ben Gazzara as Grosso; the studio also briefly considered casting the detectives as themselves, but it was not to be (although Egan does turn up in the film as the police chief Walt Simonson, and Grosso has a brief cameo as a man at the airport; furthermore, both detectives were kept on as technical advisors throughout the production).⁵³ Unable to reach an agreement on the casting of the lead role, Zanuck insisted that he did not want a major star for the film, as his impetus of “looking for reality” dictated the role should go to a virtual unknown.⁵⁴ On these grounds, Zanuck and fellow studio executive David Brown suggested Gene Hackman, who, despite his memorable supporting role in *Bonnie and Clyde*, had failed to make an impression beyond that of a character actor. At Zanuck and Brown’s urging, Friedkin met with Hackman, and would later claim that their meeting put him to sleep.⁵⁵ Friedkin did not like Hackman, and did not think him suitable for the part. However, such was his fear that the project would dissolve if he did not tow the studio line, he cast Hackman regardless.⁵⁶

For the next two months, Friedkin, Hackman and Scheider accompanied Egan and Grosso on drug busts and arrests.⁵⁷ Friedkin was obsessed with instilling his performers with the reality of policework and the narcotics trade, and reckoned that their immersion in the daily activities of police procedure would lend authenticity to their performances. Almost immediately Hackman came into conflict with Friedkin, and the real Egan took an instant dislike to the actor. In the *Making the Connection: The Untold Stories of The French Connection* documentary, both Hackman and Grosso recall instances of friction between the actor and police detective he was set to

⁵³ Sonny Grosso interview, *Making the Connection*. Eddie Egan later became a criminal consultant for Paramount, and appeared in Michael Richie’s *Prime Cut*. See A.D. Murphy (Murf), “*Prime Cut*”, *Variety*, Vol. 267, No. 5 (14 June 1972), p. 18.

⁵⁴ Richard Zanuck interview, *Making the Connection*.

⁵⁵ Friedkin, *The Poughkeepsie Shuffle*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Grosso, *Making the Connection*.

play from their earliest meetings in pre-production.⁵⁸ Both individuals came to the project having lived very different lives, and the caustically prejudiced Egan quickly came into conflict with the liberal midwesterner Hackman, who was himself struggling to reconcile his anti-authoritarian personal politics with the inflammatory subject on whom he was basing his performance. Egan was no long-dead historical figure, but very much alive and breathing – right down the actor’s neck.

Friedkin’s directorial approach when working with actors on *The French Connection* is redolent of other key films of the New Hollywood moment, from *Easy Rider* through *Two-Lane Blacktop*. Shooting on location, Friedkin assembled his performers under conditions that resembled documentary re-enactment as much as traditional drama, and had them react to one another as the situations around them unfolded and the cameras rolled. Interviewed three years after *The French Connection*, Friedkin recalled his shooting methodology: “to achieve as much spontaneity as possible... to work with actors who are free to throw away the script. [Actors] who, like me, work on a script as hard as they need to, and then disregard it and just *become* the character[s].”⁵⁹ Later still, Friedkin would say of the film that, “I don’t think there’s a line in it, or a word, that [Ernst] Tidyman wrote.”⁶⁰ The resulting performances represent a key point of departure from more traditional realisations of the *policier* genre – one obvious difference between *The French Connection* and *Dirty Harry*. All of the performances in *The French Connection* unfold with a loose, improvisatory naturalism, while Jerry Greenberg’s editing mercilessly pares them back to elliptical fragments in a taut, documentary-style framework. Friedkin’s insistence on bringing a documentary rigour to his directorial style, together with Zanuck’s vision that the film would convey a sense of realism, align *The French Connection* with two central ambition of the New Hollywood moment. In *The French*

⁵⁸ Sonny Grosso and Gene Hackman interview, *Making the Connection*.

⁵⁹ Barrett, “William Friedkin Interview”, *Conversations with Directors*, p. 16, emphasis in original.

⁶⁰ Friedkin, *The Poughkeepsie Shuffle*.

Connection, Friedkin implements the voguish stylistic characteristics of the New Hollywood within the constraints of a clearly defined genre, at a time when re-combinations of disparate generic forms (*M*A*S*H*, *Little Big Man*), and an appropriation of generic iconography combined with the resolute abandonment of generic convention (*Five Easy Pieces*, *Two-Lane Blacktop*) reigned supreme. *The French Connection* subverts generic convention in more subtle and subversive ways. Its subject matter and pseudodocumentary aesthetic and stylistic modes lull its audience into the assumption that it will follow the narrative conventions of the *policier*. Hackman's performance offers one jarring point of generic discontinuity, and the film eventually departs wholly from a generically-enshrined narrative, even as the formal narrative superstructure continues to progress along generic lines. In other words, the film's formal and narrative systems lead the audience to expect that Hackman will eventually catch the crooks, even as they eventually escape from under his nose.

The French Connection would be Hackman's first starring role. Ostensibly, Hackman's casting fulfilled Zanuck's directive that *The French Connection* have no stars – despite his Academy Award nomination for his intense performance as Buck Barrow in *Bonnie and Clyde*, Hackman had failed to consolidate that success with a breakout performance in the ensuing years. He followed up *Bonnie and Clyde* with two attempts at capitalising on the youth-cult phenomenon: John Frankenheimer's *The Gypsy Moths* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1969), which transplanted self-imposed alienation from the highway to the skies amongst a fraternity of skydivers; and Michael Ritchie's debut *Downhill Racer*, with Hackman playing Robert Redford's skiing coach. Neither film enjoyed enormous success. Other Hackman films of the period failed to attract much attention altogether. Largely forgotten now are films such as John Sturges' space drama *Marooned* (Columbia Pictures, 1969) with

Gregory Peck, the violent prison drama *Riot* (dir. Buzz Kulik, Paramount Pictures, 1969) and the low-key theatrical adaptation *I Never Sang for My Father*, a film with some thematic parallels to *Five Easy Pieces*, as Hackman's Gene Garrison attempts to care for his aging father played by Melvyn Douglas.⁶¹ Where Hackman registered in the public consciousness, it was as a semi-obscure bit-player on the fringes of the New Hollywood, similar to the status Friedkin himself was experiencing in the wake of the limited success of *The Birthday Party* and *The Boys in the Band*. Given his relative unfamiliarity, Hackman represented an unknown quantity for audiences in 1971, and provided no comfortable star persona or generic affiliation around which audiences could form their pre-conceptions (the same could be said for director Friedkin). Contrast this with *Dirty Harry*, and the inescapable presence of Clint Eastwood, which looms large over the film long before the first reel has even been projected. For Eastwood, *Dirty Harry* represented a conscious attempt to separate his onscreen persona from its association with the western genre. Nevertheless, *Dirty Harry* essentially finds Eastwood's "Man with No Name" character transplanted to a contemporary San Francisco setting, governed by an equally rigorous set of generic conventions. Much of the appeal of *Dirty Harry* comes from witnessing Eastwood's fulfilment of his unspoken contract with the audience, as he relentlessly pursues the psychopathic Scorpio through a gradually tightening series of action set-pieces and narrative obstacles. Harry's dirtiness is carefully sanctioned by the screenplay, as is the satisfaction we derive from watching it: Scorpio is so cartoonishly evil that we simply must see him eliminated, and have no choice but to baulk at the stifling bureaucracy of the San Francisco police department, and the incompetence of the one-dimensionally spineless mayor. These tangential, undeveloped characters exist as gears in the narrative machinery to wind up the tension as they periodically appear to

⁶¹ Director John Sturges would later take a trip into similar territory as *Dirty Harry*, attempting to rehabilitate John Wayne's aging screen persona through contemporary Seattle detective-work in *McQ* (Warner Bros., 1974).

defer Harry Callahan from achieving his goal (killing Scorpio) at which point the film may end. Over all of this hangs the spectre of Clint Eastwood, a signpost for a particular kind of generic entertainment. Harry Callahan is inescapably Eastwood, and *Dirty Harry* is inescapably generic. Once Scorpio lies dead, the generic contract is fulfilled.

Eastwood's Harry Callahan is defined by a cool, unhurried machismo. Even when pursuing criminal adversaries, *Dirty Harry* affords its star time to chew the scenery and deliver poker-faced wisecracks before discharging the killer shot. These signature mannerisms are a part of Clint Eastwood's established on-screen persona. "Dirty" Harry Callahan is sympathetic to the extent that by entering the cinema, we enter a contract that we will spend the following 100 minutes watching Clint Eastwood blow people away. Siegel and Eastwood are good enough to uphold their end of the bargain. The relationship between stardom and generic satisfaction in *The French Connection* is far more complex. Hackman came to the project free of the lineage of cinematic associations that Eastwood brought with him to (and traded off in) *Dirty Harry*. Eastwood's well-established screen persona provided all of the backstory and psychological motivation an audience needed to follow *Dirty Harry*. Hackman's Popeye Doyle is almost a total reversal of Eastwood's Callahan. Where Callahan enters his film striding purposefully onto the rooftop crime-scene, Popeye literally crashes into *The French Connection* absurdly dressed as Santa Claus (his first line in the movie, delivered in-character as Santa while on an undercover stakeout, is, "Merry Christmas," after which he leads a cadre of African-American children in an impromptu rendition of "Jingle Bells"), with a breakneck footchase through Harlem. The speed of this action sequence is emphasised through a series of shots taken from a moving vehicle travelling parallel to the subject on the sidewalk, and cut at a rapid pace unusual for a Hollywood film of the time. The film does

nothing to shy away from the brutality with which Popeye and Cloudy manhandle the African-American suspect, punching and kicking him while he is on the ground, dragging him handcuffed to a vacant block, where Cloudy menaces him with a metal pipe, and Popeye interrogates him with a series of non-sequiturs that have no logical bearing on the narrative (“When’s the last time you picked your feet? Who’s your connection, Willie?... Is it Joe the barber?... You ever been to Poughkeepsie?”). Throughout the long take that frames Popeye, Cloudy and the suspect on the debris-strewn block, Hackman wags his finger wildly, gestures forcefully, and yells uncontrollably (“I want to bust him!”) as the Santa Claus beard dangles from his neck. Popeye’s entrance to the film establishes several recurring motifs: Popeye Doyle’s aggressive, physical presence, the unexpected moments of physical action that will periodically intrude into the film, and the fundamental incoherence of the plot (along with Popeye’s absurd Santa costume, his dialogue about “picking your feet in Poughkeepsie” serves no narrative purpose here, and its meaning is never explained. Despite being derived from a catchphrase of the real Egan, this fact is never made clear in the film; in this sequence, it functions as nothing more than a non-sequitur that adds colour to Hackman’s portrayal of the character).⁶² Hackman maintains this pattern of aggression (both physical and verbal), barely-contained physical activity and outburst throughout *The French Connection*. Todd Berliner observes that Hackman “instills the character with a gruff, abrasive energy: drumming his fingers, banging on tables and cars, smacking his chewing gum even as he’s drinking, rubbing his face, chomping food, running his tongue along the inside of his bottom lip. The actor never stays still”.⁶³ In contrast to Eastwood’s performance in *Dirty Harry*, which trades almost entirely off the singular, cultivated mannerisms of a well-established screen persona in the Old Hollywood mould of

⁶² *Making the Connection*.

⁶³ Berliner, p. 100.

stardom, Hackman's Popeye represents the actor's wholesale transformation into his interpretation of Egan - nervy, compulsive, all impulsive hunch. Hackman's total immersion in the role is very much in the New Hollywood method mould of Pacino, Nicholson, Hoffman. His eventual triumph at the Academy Awards for 1971 perhaps set the precedent Hollywood's acknowledgement of the actor's ability to physically and psychologically become a monster, a feat Robert DeNiro would even more sensationally repeat with *Raging Bull* (dir. Martin Scorsese, United Artists, 1980).

These differing modes of stardom in *Dirty Harry* and *The French Connection* are established with the trailers of each film. The trailer for *Dirty Harry* places Eastwood front and centre, with the actor's name appearing onscreen twice, bookending the trailer. Furthermore, the voiceover narrator conflates Eastwood with the Dirty Harry character, at one point stating, "Clint Eastwood: detective Harry Callahan. You don't assign him to murder cases. You just turn him loose." The prime impetus of the *Dirty Harry* trailer is branding the film as consistent with the style of violent entertainment associated with Eastwood's previous roles, albeit transplanted from the wild west into a contemporary urban setting.

On the other hand, the trailer for *The French Connection* emphasises Popeye Doyle, from its opening line of dialogue, "alright, Popeye's here," to its voiceover narration, which states, "Doyle fights dirty, and plays rough. Doyle is bad news. But he's a good cop." Gene Hackman is mentioned only once by name in the trailer, whereas Popeye Doyle is mentioned six times.⁶⁴

To return to a consideration of both films' status as 'genre films', which is defined by Thomas Schatz as revolving around, "familiar, essentially one-dimensional characters acting out a predictable story pattern within a familiar

⁶⁴ As a side note, each trailer employs the stylistic traits of the film it promotes: the *Dirty Harry* trailer contains seventy five cuts and clips from ten different sequences of the film in its 3:25 running time, whereas *The French Connection* trailer contains 115 cuts and clips from eighteen different sequences in its significantly shorter 2:46 running time.

setting”.⁶⁵ In opposition to the genre film, Schatz also defines the non-genre film, which, “tended to attract greater critical attention during the studio era” and which is defined by a plot which “does not progress through conventional conflicts toward a predictable resolution”.⁶⁶ Although Schatz was writing here about the Classical Hollywood era, which he believes ended around 1960, we can still place *Dirty Harry* fairly neatly in the category of a genre film, whereas *The French Connection* purports to be a genre film, it in fact employs the narrative characteristics of the non-genre film.

With none of the genre affiliations of Eastwood’s *Dirty Harry*, *The French Connection* lacks clear signposts as to how an audience should respond to its protagonist. Harry Callahan’s litany of prejudices is delivered with a heavy dose of knowing irony by a charismatic actor who was already considered likeable by a sizeable segment of the movie-going public. It is hard to imagine that even the most ardent Gene Hackman fan would not feel discomfort at the sight of Popeye aggressively and demeaningly ordering African-American bar clientele up against a wall. Indeed, such ambivalence at the unpleasant aspects of Popeye Doyle’s character plagued Hackman on set. Friedkin was already offside over his compromise with Fox to cast Hackman in the lead, and felt convinced that the actor “was never prepared to commit one hundred percent as the kind of racist... cop”.⁶⁷ Hackman later recalled that he, “talked to... [Friedkin] about some of the racist dialogue, and... he wouldn’t hear of it, he said, ‘that’s the way it is, and that’s what we have to do,’ so I just had to kind of suck it up and do the dialogue”.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the real Eddie Egan, on-set in an advisory capacity baulked at what he perceived as the actor’s unwillingness to,

⁶⁵ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1981), p. 6.

⁶⁶ Schatz, p. 7.

⁶⁷ Friedkin, *The Poughkeepsie Shuffle*.

⁶⁸ Hackman, *The Poughkeepsie Shuffle*.

“play everything one hundred percent mean”.⁶⁹ Roy Scheider recalls Hackman’s struggle to humanise Popeye, and Friedkin’s resistance, as, “Gene kept trying to find a way to make the guy human, to give the guy three dimensions... and Billy kept saying no, he’s a son of a bitch, he’s no good, he’s a prick”.⁷⁰ The resulting battle of wills perhaps contributed to the atmosphere of provocation and antagonism in Hackman’s edgy performance, and the film as a whole; Friedkin, at least, retrospectively attributes Hackman’s performance to his own directorial efforts to, “light a fire under... [Hackman] every day... hour by hour, and make him crazy”.⁷¹ Ultimately, the confrontational aspects of Popeye Doyle’s personality, combined with Hackman’s committed performance, and the lack of a clarifying star persona, mean we are confused as to whether or not the protagonist of *The French Connection* is as morally repugnant as he appears to be, although regardless, we must spend the duration of the film following his actions. The film never articulates its moral stance on that which it portrays. Like *Dirty Harry*, we see little of Popeye Doyle’s life outside of his police-work. Like Harry Callahan, Doyle is such a resolute, authoritarian bully it is hard to imagine him functioning in any other profession. The rare glimpses of Popeye’s personal life - hanging out in bars, and his unbelievably effortless seduction of a much younger woman - do little to dispel the unpleasant aspects of his character.⁷² Popeye’s list of transgressions doesn’t stop at his racism: throughout the course of the film, he perfunctorily picks up anonymous women for sex, flagrantly abuses and assaults criminal suspects, inadvertently allows several

⁶⁹ Hackman, *The Poughkeepsie Shuffle*.

⁷⁰ Roy Scheider interview, *The Poughkeepsie Shuffle*.

⁷¹ Friedkin, *The Poughkeepsie Shuffle*.

⁷² Like many of the American films of its era, *The French Connection* limits its roles for female characters to those of wives, girlfriends, and oft-unspeaking objects of sexual desire. Could it be that the supposedly conservative, fascist *Dirty Harry* offers a more sympathetic portrayal of its female characters? See Harry’s dialogue with Chico’s wife at his hospital - while this film still casts women as wives, and damsels in distress to be protected (Ann Mary Deacon), Chico’s wife Norma is at least permitted the agency to hold a thoughtful conversation with Callahan, better than anything afforded to the anonymous, unspeaking sex object who shares Popeye Doyle’s bed for no other reason, seemingly, than to affirm his heterosexuality for the audience.

suspects to escape, and causes wanton property damage during a car chase which climaxes when Popeye shoots his fleeing, unarmed suspect in the back.

The New York of *The French Connection* is a cesspool of crime, corruption, and decay. In a decade that offered few flattering portrayals of America's urban centres, the stygian Hell of Friedkin's film joins Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* as two of the most unremittingly bleak. Friedkin's catalogue of locations (dingy bars, shabby diners, frozen trash-strewn streets) provides a fittingly decrepit backdrop for Popeye Doyle's obsessive pursuit of the drug dealers. In this environment, it is hard to imagine that his heavy-handed bullishness will effect any meaningful change; the removal of these particular drug dealers from the scene will change little for those awash in the sea of crime, addiction, poverty, and sickness. Popeye can perhaps be understood as a product of his environment, his routine antagonisms an automatic response to the violent world around him. The detective work of *The French Connection* offers no centring balance to its unstable moral universe, and at the end of the film the most senior figures in the drug smuggling ring will escape. By contrast, Siegel's San Francisco of *Dirty Harry* is as outlandish as his earlier New York in *Coogan's Bluff*, a conservative's paranoid playground of liberal permissiveness gone mad, in which African American bankrobbers and psychopathic snipers walk the streets, and gay men solicit sex in parks at night, all with the blessing of City Hall. Scorpio, impossibly evil, cannot be allowed to continue living in the morally conventional universe of the film. Regardless of whether or not we find Harry's actions morally objectionable, he is the only man prepared to take the steps to eliminate the menace. The adversaries of *The French Connection* are of a different mould: shadowy, affluent, with motivations and intentions that may only be guessed at as fragments of information come to light, suggesting a vast conspiracy that stretches beyond the diegesis. Any hints at a seedier underbelly of the sunny San

Francisco of *Dirty Harry* pale when placed alongside any frame of Friedkin's filth-ridden New York. Popeye is firmly enmeshed in the belly of a different beast, a perpetual struggle for daily survival and base physical dominance in an ever-assailing maelstrom.

The formal workings and narrative mode of *The French Connection* are unconventional to say the least. Zanuck's insistence that the film convey a fundamental sense of realism is reflected through the documentary-style aesthetic Friedkin pursues - handheld camera and rapid cutting influenced by Côtas-Gavras' *Z* (Cinema V, 1969); fast film stock; overlapping and indistinct audio, a fragmentation of cinematic time and space, with montage sequences often arranged by association, rather than through spatially motivated means; naturalistic, seemingly off-the-cuff performances; and real world locations. All convey a sense of immediacy that is lacking from the more stylistically conventional *Dirty Harry*. Siegel frames *Dirty Harry* largely in wide shots, with the camera panning to follow the characters' movements through space, breaking into shot/reverse shot editing to emphasise important lines of dialogue, whereas Friedkin is concerned with a perpetual sense of cinematic motion, with his constantly-moving, often handheld shots cut together at a rapid pace, with an emphasis on montage over long takes or spatial coherence, and the jarring nature of editor Greenberg's rapid cutting drawing attention to the cinematic form and auteurist intent.

Less apparent, but equally indicative of the position *The French Connection* holds amidst the films of the New Hollywood, is its continual trend of narrative failure. According to Todd Berliner, *The French Connection* works, "by employing and then subverting conventional Hollywood scenarios... creat[ing] unsettling narrative ambiguities," in the form of incoherence and genre deviation.⁷³ A

⁷³ Berliner, p. 91.

confrontation between Doyle and his superiors takes place beside a gruesome, narratively-unmotivated car wreck;⁷⁴ a sniper, aiming to silence Doyle, misses his target, and instead hits a woman pushing a pram;⁷⁵ as previously noted, the celebrated car chase ends with Popeye shooting a fleeing unarmed man in the back;⁷⁶ the film concludes with Popeye Doyle bungling the final sting, allowing the principal suspects to escape, inadvertently killing the FBI agent Mulderig in the process.⁷⁷ All of these sequences are inventions of Friedkin and Tidyman - none of them appear in Moore's original book, or the factual case on which it was based. By emphasising such unconventional elements of his film, and inserting deliberately incongruous moments that are extraneous to the original source material, Friedkin casts *The French Connection* alongside many of the post-*Easy Rider* films. Despite its urban police setting and superficial generic affiliations, the pall of failure, alienation and death hangs over its conclusion. A series of titles at the end of the film reveal that for all his bluster, Popeye has been unable to effect any real change: the big fish of *The French Connection* all slip through the net, and the film ends with its characters in a kind of generic stasis amid a disquieting atmosphere of failure and defeat. This descending mood of inaction and fatalism repeats across the conclusions of many New Hollywood films. Like *Easy Rider*, after spending its duration in the company of a morally-questionable protagonist, *The French Connection* must end with his punishment, not his triumph. Friedkin's use of the documentary aesthetic, or, as he referred to it, "induced documentary... [making] it look like the camera just happened on the scene," imbues each moment of the film with a sense of visceral realism, which combines with its rapid pace to gloss over its plot holes and narrative

⁷⁴ Berliner, p. 108.

⁷⁵ Ibid, pp. 108-109.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 109.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 113-117.

incoherencies.⁷⁸ These fashionable conventions meant that the film was viewed under the critically-approved auspices of the nascent New Hollywood, ensuring its eventual triumph at the 1971 Academy Awards. *The French Connection* would go on to be the third highest grossing release of the year, while *Dirty Harry* was the sixth highest.

Critical responses to *The French Connection* generally praised Friedkin's overwhelming cinematic style, and his achievements were confirmed by the industry itself when the film won five Academy Awards the following year. Pauline Kael, the self-styled moral arbitrator of mainstream film criticism at the time, expressed some reservations about the warts-and-all presentation of Popeye Doyle, casting his lack of, "any attractive qualities," as "right-wing, left-wing, take-your-choice cynicism... [and] total commercial opportunism passing itself off as an Existential view".⁷⁹ Elsewhere in her review, though, Kael praises the film as, "an extraordinarily well-made new thriller"⁸⁰ of, "almost unbearable suspense"⁸¹ and, "sheer pounding abrasiveness".⁸²

Kael was less equivocal in her assessment of *Dirty Harry*, and generally mirrored the wider reception that greeted the film which she lambasted as, "a remarkably single-minded attack on liberal values, with each prejudicial detail in place,"⁸³ and, "a deeply immoral movie".⁸⁴ When comparing the two films in her *Dirty Harry* review, Kael wrote that Siegel's film, "is not one of those ambivalent, you-can-read-it-either-way jobs like *The French Connection*; Inspector Harry Callahan is not a Popeye - porkpie-hatted and lewd and boorish. He's soft-spoken Clint Eastwood - six feet four of lean, tough saint, blue-eyed and shaggy-haired...

⁷⁸ Friedkin, *The Poughkeepsie Shuffle*.

⁷⁹ Pauline Kael, "Urban Gothic", *The New Yorker* (30 October 1971), reprinted in Pauline Kael, *Deeper Into Movies* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), pp. 318-319, emphasis in original.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 315.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 316.

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 317.

⁸³ Kael, "Saint Cop", *Deeper Into Movies*, p. 386.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 388.

He's the best there is".⁸⁵ Kael's inference here is clear: *Dirty Harry*, with its identifiable, charismatic star and adherence to old-fashioned generic structures, belongs to the out-of-favour mode of Hollywood past, and Siegel's invisible, Classical directorial style leaves its problematic political content in clear sight. On the other hand, the bravura pseudo-documentary style of *The French Connection*, along with Hackman's mesmerising performance, assert themselves as objects worthy of critical praise, not only obscuring its no less problematic content, but, on the contrary, shifting the context of critical reception so that "Popeye's" racism, for instance, may be regarded as unflinching realism, rather than underlying bigotry. Ultimately, *The French Connection* employed the prerequisite devices to be considered a part of the New Hollywood: contemporary resonance, genre frustration and revisionism, an emphasis on performance over stardom, a downbeat, fatalistic ending, and a self-conscious foregrounding of film style. Such characteristics signalled to the critical establishment that *The French Connection* was a candidate for canonical elevation in the burgeoning New Hollywood moment, whereas *Dirty Harry* belonged to the receding Hollywood of Old. Such categorisations have continued to inform recent approaches to each film: Paul Ramaeker's 2010 "Realism, revisionism and visual style: *The French Connection* and the New Hollywood *policier*" considers the stylistic influence of Friedkin's film on a post-Classical action aesthetic, whereas Joe Street's "Dirty Harry's San Francisco" considers the political ramifications of that film's setting.⁸⁶ The fate of these two films demonstrates that in the critically constructed New Hollywood, conservatism resided not in political outlook, but in the mechanics of film style, the politics of Hollywood's star system, and in the interpretations of critics with political agendas of their own. Closer analysis of *The*

⁸⁵ Kael, "Saint Cop", *Deeper Into Movies*, p.385.

⁸⁶ See Paul Ramaeker, "Realism, revisionism and visual style: *The French Connection* and the New Hollywood *policier*", *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 8, No. 2 (June, 2010), pp. 144-163; and Street, "Dirty Harry's San Francisco".

French Connection reveals its difficult hybrid status. Friedkin's uneasy standing, aligned with neither Old nor New Hollywood, was confirmed by the unprecedented commercial success of his subsequent film *The Exorcist* (Warner Bros., 1973), which, more than the more-commonly cited *Jaws*, represents the first "event film" blockbuster of the 1970s. Friedkin's big splash in the first half of the decade would not ensure career longevity - like fellow transitional figure Michael Cimino, Friedkin's slide from feted superstar to *persona non grata* would neatly coincide with the decade's end.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE LIMITS OF AUTEURISM

PART I: *The Last Movie*

In the wake of *Easy Rider*, the two totemic figureheads of its success, Hopper, and Fonda, were each given \$1million and complete creative freedom, and turned loose by Universal. The resulting films, Hopper's *The Last Movie* and Fonda's *The Hired Hand*, further expand upon *Easy Rider*'s play with western iconography, each arriving at different end-points of the western genre. Beyond their shared thematic material, the two films could not be more different, with Hopper's sprawling, barely-contained film contrasting pointedly with Fonda's determinedly small scale work. Both films would be the subject of critical derision and box-office failure, curtailing both filmmakers' directorial ambitions. The critical and commercial failures of both *The Last Movie* and *The Hired Hand* represent the closure of the *Easy Rider* moment, with both films marking the limits of the New Hollywood project.

Dennis Hopper conceived of *The Last Movie* long before *Easy Rider*, when he was on location in Mexico as a performer in Henry Hathaway's *The Sons of Katie Elder* (dir. Henry Hathaway, Paramount Pictures, 1965), and found himself wondering what would happen when the film crew departed, leaving the Western sets standing - how would the local community interact with these buildings?¹ Hopper took the concept to *Rebel Without A Cause* screenwriter Stewart Stern, who penned a screenplay with Montgomery Clift in mind for the role of an American stuntman who remains behind in a Mexican town after completing a film shoot there.² Hopper's co-star from *The Sons of Katie Elder*, John Wayne, and that film's director, Hathaway, were to play themselves, but the project fell through when record producer Phil Spector backed out of his planned investment, and the screenplay languished until Universal courted Hopper with the promise of total creative control for his follow-up

¹ Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, p. 313.

² Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, p. 124.

to *Easy Rider*.³ Universal put up the \$850 000 budget with a guarantee of no studio interference so long as Hopper stayed within budget. For his part, the director took a relatively meagre salary of \$500 per week, along with a fifty percent slice of the profits.⁴ In a feature article covering the shoot in *Life* magazine, Hopper would candidly tell Brad Darrach, “this is the big one... If I foul up now, they’ll say *Easy Rider* was a fluke. But I’ve got to take chances to do what I want”.⁵

The Last Movie was shot in the town of Chincheros, Peru, the country informally known as the, “cocaine capital of the world”.⁶ The tone of the film veers from manic, hyperstimulated amphetamine highs to the mellow murk of heavy hallucinogens, defying logical description. The principal narrative follows Hopper’s stuntman Kansas (the part originally intended for Clift) as he remains in a small Peruvian village following the completion of a Hollywood western shoot, hoping to secure work on subsequent productions he hopes will be drawn to the sets left behind. In the meantime, Kansas and his local girlfriend build a house atop a mountain. When it becomes apparent that no further productions are coming to town, Kansas concocts a scheme with a fellow expatriate, Neville Robey (Don Gordon) to purchase land to prospect for gold. They attempt to secure the financial backing of another expatriate, broom magnate Harry Anderson (Roy Engel), a venture which ends in destitution and Neville’s intimated suicide. Meanwhile, a movie does come to town, but not the one Kansas was hoping to work on: the local population of the village, inspired by the Hollywood production, stage a film of their own, with pretend movie cameras, but real, unsimulated acts of violence. Kansas’ services are unwittingly enlisted, resulting in him being wounded by gunshots. He escapes, but is later led back to the shoot by

³ Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, p. 313. Later, Hopper would consider casting the roles with Peter and Henry Fonda, with a role for Jane as well. See Tom Folsom, *Hopper: A Journey Into the American Dream* (New York: It Books, 2013), p. 98.

⁴ J. Hoberman, *Dennis Hopper: From Method to Madness* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 1988), p. 20.

⁵ Brad Darrach, “The Easy Rider Runs Wild in the Andes”, *Life* (19 June 1970), p. 56.

⁶ Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, p. 127.

the village priest, where he is killed during a re-enactment of the death of Billy the Kid from the earlier Hollywood shoot. At this point in the film, the line between fiction and documentary blurs, as outtakes from behind the scenes of *The Last Movie* are intercut with documentary-style shots of village life.

This tension between documentary and fiction is a feature that persists throughout *The Last Movie*. The opening sequence of the film contains pseudo-documentary footage of a religious rite conducted by the Chincheros locals, which stylistically resembles the New Orleans sequence from *Easy Rider* with its use of hand-held cameras, wide angle lens, and non-continuous montage. Enraptured, Hopper's Kansas, present in his own pseudo-documentary sequence (as in *Easy Rider*), watches on, and freaks out. The religious rite that opens *The Last Movie* is intercut with footage from the Billy the Kid film which is being made in Chincheros. No narrative clarification is provided to privilege the diegetic authenticity of one sequence over the other, so the audience is unaware of which sequence represents the "true" narrative of *The Last Movie*.⁷ Actor Severn Darden is shown standing onstage singing a minstrel song while Toni Basil performs high kicks. The film cuts to a slow-motion shot of an explosion ripping through a store, knocking a number of cowboys from their horses, as Kris Kristofferson's "Good for Nothing Blues" anachronistically, and non-diegetically, plays on the soundtrack. A card game in a saloon explodes into a bloody shootout on the town's main street, mimicking, and perhaps parodying, the iconic slow-motion bloodletting of Peckinpah's recent *The Wild Bunch*, as horses are pulled to the ground, and cowboys topple from rooftops. Unlike the equally bloody shootout which opens Peckinpah's film, and which functions as an exercise in narrative suspense and payoff, Hopper's shootout is narratively irreconcilable with the pseudo-documentary sequence which precedes it.

⁷ If such narrative supremacy exists at all in *The Last Movie*; the objective diegetic reality is called into question by the unraveling culmination of Hopper's film.

Stylistically, the use of hyper-real slow motion contrasts with the documentary-style aesthetic with which the religious ceremony is depicted, employing a set of stylistic markers emphasising veracity by deploying familiar documentary conventions. By contrast, the subsequent shootout sequence telegraphs the emptiness of conventional Hollywood cinematic representation by depicting spectacular events that have been abstracted from narrative context; the act of killing is repeated ad-nauseam, the conventions of continuity editing and spatial coherence left intact as a succession of unfamiliar characters blast away at one another for reasons that are yet to be established. The scale of the action in this lengthy sequence would put the climactic moments of many “straight” westerns to shame, and Hopper places it before the ten-minute mark of his film, divorced entirely from an expository framework. *The Last Movie* offers few other such conventionally-depicted moments in its duration, even as narrative gradually emerges.

Hopper’s subversive intentions with the shootout sequence are hinted at by the presence of Peter Fonda, who appears briefly onscreen framed only in wide-shots, and is one of the many anonymous characters to be killed off in the first ten minutes of the film. Indeed, it would be possible for the inattentive viewer to miss the cameo of the *Easy Rider* star altogether, as Hopper effectively curtails the mechanics of stardom, reducing Fonda to the most minimal of onscreen roles. Many other Hollywood identities such as Toni Basil, Sam Fuller, Henry Jaglom, Dean Stockwell and Russ Tamblyn briefly appear in this early film-within-the-film, and then disappear from *The Last Movie*, which for its remainder is predominantly populated with unknowns beside Hopper.

It is not until later in the film that the status of this sequence as movie-within-a-movie becomes apparent, as Hopper mingles with the cast and crew of the western at an out-of-hours party. This sequence is one of many explicitly Godardian moments

in *The Last Movie*, as Hopper employs the fragmented didactic editing style and jarring non-diegetic audio intrusions that were hallmarks of Godard's late-New Wave films from *Pierrot le fou* (Pathé Contemporary Films, 1965) through to *Week End* (1967). In Hopper's party sequence, a lengthy tracking shot follows Hopper's Kansas as he walks the length of a hallway past different rooms at the party; in each room, a different song is being performed: Waylon Jennings singing his country song "My God and I"; a barrelhouse honky tonk piano performance; a traditional Peruvian chant. The overlapping, simultaneously performed soundscapes, "reveal at each stage different aspects of the interpenetration of American and local cultures".⁸ The sequence concludes as Kansas goes outside and cries as all three sounds are heard at once, clashing on the soundtrack.

Throughout the *Last Movie*, Hopper (an uncredited editor), editors David Berlatsky and Antranig Mahakian, sound mixer Le Roy Robbins and uncredited supervising sound editor James Nelson continue to play such games with his use of sound. One particularly notable instance comes at the five minute mark of the film, when a hammering sound intrudes upon the soundtrack, accompanying a shot of a mock steeple made from paper and wood being raised in front of village church, followed by a low-angle shot of a dead cowboy/actor from the film-within-the-film, which tilts up past a boom microphone - the intrusion of this piece of film equipment is *The Last Movie*'s first intimation that all may not be as it seems, further bringing into question the source of the offscreen hammering sound. The origin of the sound is revealed in the 28th minute of the film, as Kansas casually strides past a sculptor at work, producing the same hammering sound. Such moments of formal play relentlessly reinforce the artifice of the film, as Hopper intermittently allows non-diegetic sound effects to intrude upon his soundscape. At various points, the sounds

⁸ Heffernan, p. 15.

of hammering, audio reels being cued, electronic beeping, a music box, the clamour of machinery, and disembodied voices are heard, often incongruously clashing with what is being presented onscreen. Nick Heffernan argues that the sound design of *The Last Movie*, “functions as an aural palimpsest, reinforcing the idea of the culture as a collision and succession of influences rather than the simple domination of the colonized by the colonizer,,” sonically reinforcing the theme of cultural imperialism which runs throughout the film, and simultaneously acknowledging the conditions of its own production.⁹

Visually, too, the artifice of the film is repeatedly highlighted, not least through the subplot involving the Chincheros locals remaking the Hollywood Billy the Kid film. The shootout sequence that forms the opening of *The Last Movie* is re-enacted three further times in the course of Hopper’s film. The first re-enactment shows the sequence from the perspective of the fictional Hollywood production, as Samuel Fuller, playing himself, directs Dean Stockwell in the role of Billy the Kid, with the crew and camera equipment visibly onscreen. Fuller, regarded in wide shot, yells the direction, “get your camera ready! Move your camera over where it’s supposed to be!” at which point Hopper’s shot tracks left in a moment that melds, “both planes of [cinematic] reality,” as Fuller appears to be directing the movie he is in.¹⁰ Portions of the shootout are recreated before the film crew, this time with Hopper’s camera regarding not just the action but also the crew, taking in camera tracks and dolly, sound equipment, and several reflectors which dazzlingly direct their light directly at Hopper’s camera. This assembled equipment all obscures the view of the (staged) gunplay. Later, the villagers will enact their own version of this sequence, with mock cameras constructed from wood, but real guns. Their final re-enactment concludes with Kansas’ death, at which point Hopper includes seemingly

⁹ Heffernan, p. 15.

¹⁰ Andrew Tracy, “(En)fin de cinema - Andrew Tracy on *The Last Movie*” *Reverse Shot* (Autumn 2004). <<http://www.reverseshot.com/legacy/autumn04/lastmovie.html>>. (Accessed 18 June 2013).

candid footage of himself on set, and documentary footage of the real behind-the-scenes production of *The Last Movie*. My attempt to describe these many sequences indicates the difficulty one encounters when attempting to negotiate *The Last Movie* and its many shifting layers of reality and unreality. In Hopper's film, the line between reality and fiction is never clearly delineated. No one strand of the fractured diegesis is elevated to be more "authentic" than any other. Fuller's Hollywood western, its reinterpretation by the Chincheros, Kansas' moments of pastoral idyll with his girlfriend Maria (Stella Garcia), and Hopper's intrusion as himself into the rushes and behind-the-scenes shots at the film's conclusion are all represented with equal degrees of authority and authenticity, and self-referentiality abounds. The village priest, concerned that his movie-obsessed congregation no longer attend church since Hollywood came to town, leads his flock to the movie-set church facade, hoping to demonstrate that faith and morality persist within the "movie church". Within this structure, a large painting depicts a valley and mountain range, which in turn obscures the view of the actual mountains beyond. In another documentary-style sequence in which a handheld camera follows Hopper walking through a market, the roaming camera becomes Hopper's subjective eye, interacting with the locals he encounters, as they gaze directly down the lens, or cover their faces, explicitly drawing attention to the presence of the camera. At another point, a dialogue scene is interrupted by a title card reading "scene missing". Moments of playful surrealism abound, often with no obvious narrative purpose, providing moments of alienation which cast Hopper's film as a cinematic realisation of the Brechtian model of, "politicized theory and practice that opposes standard codes of realism, while implementing an artistic practice that is political and performs work on representation, subjectivity, and pleasure".¹¹ Hopper embraces these elements of the

¹¹ Philip Rosen, "Screen and 1970s Film Theory", in Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (eds.), *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p.274.

Brechtian tradition as he emulates two of his acknowledged cinematic influences: Buñuel and Jodorowsky.¹² *The Last Movie* offers repeated bizarre interludes, as otherworldly images intrude upon everyday moments, passing by unremarked upon by characters, and the diegesis itself: while driving through the mountains (or a painting of a snow-capped mountain standing before the actual mountain it depicts), Kansas almost collides with another vehicle - inexplicably, a man is tied to the rear of the passing car. Later, at the house of the rich US expatriate broom magnates the Andersons, the camera captures the conclusion of a bizarre argument with their child daughter, played by an adult woman clutching a ridiculously oversized doll, who has a childish tantrum and storms impetuously from the room.

At times, *The Last Movie* emulates characteristics of *Easy Rider*, particularly in its musical sequences, which in both films function as self-contained moments of spectacle detached from causally-based narrative. Where *Easy Rider* casts its rock numbers alongside montages of motorcycles, *The Last Movie* contains similar sequences of Kansas riding his horse through mountainous regions, or frolicking with his girlfriend Maria in verdant meadows, accompanied by a soundtrack of Kris Kristofferson songs; Kristofferson is one of many musical performers to appear onscreen as himself, in his screen debut one year before his leading role playing a version of himself alongside Gene Hackman in *Cisco Pike* (dir. Bill L. Norton, Columbia Pictures, 1972). J. Hoberman contends that in *The Last Movie*, these sequences function as a parody of *Easy Rider*, but it is equally likely that Hopper was simply continuing to develop the aesthetic practices employed in his earlier film.¹³

Kansas' addled recovery from the bullet wounds that riddle his body following his

¹² Legend has it that Hopper initially assembled a more formally conventional cut of *The Last Movie*, which he eagerly showed to Jodorowsky. The Chilean director expressed his deep disappointment and disapproval that Hopper had adhered so rigidly to Hollywood convention, which prompted Hopper to abandon this version of the film and fashion a new cut adopting the more radical stylistic approach of the final film. Whether or not this story is true, it is a notable element of the mythology surrounding *The Last Movie*.

¹³ J. Hoberman, "Drugstore Cowboy", *Village Voice* (8 August 2006). <<http://www.villagevoice.com/2006-08-08/film/drugstore-cowboy/>>. (Accessed 19 June 2013).

first run-in with the Chincheros' telling of the Billy the Kid story, employs the distorted, scrambled jump cut lexicon of *Easy Rider*'s acid trip sequence, as Hopper's frenzied montage whips through a parade of the film's characters, milk spurts from a lactating breast, while on the soundtrack Hopper insistently whines, "I'm dying," against the sound of a braying donkey.

Where *Easy Rider* shied away from contemporary political comment even as it adopted the clothing and hairstyles of the counterculture, *The Last Movie* displays no such compunction. The Vietnam War, which goes unnamed throughout Hopper's first film, is openly invoked in one pointed sequence in *The Last Movie*, as expatriate Neville Robey plucks a chicken he recently shot, "just like a gook." Kansas' reply comes, "you love that damn war, man, it's like a childhood sweetheart to you, ain't it?"

Elsewhere, Hopper displays what may alternately be taken as caustic satire or the same brand of misogyny that underlay *Easy Rider*'s portrayal of women. Much of the dialogue spoken by Maria involves her demands that Kansas buy her American consumer luxuries: a swimming pool, a fur coat, "one General Electric refrigerator," echoing Godard's similar quotation of brand-name as dialogue. Maria tells Kansas, "just because we don't have electricity and running water, it don't mean we don't like to have nice things, gringo." Later, an understated high angle shot reveals that, bizarrely, a swimming pool has in fact been installed at the base of the mountain upon which Kansas resides in Chincheros. The legacy that Hollywood has imported, it seems, is one of regimented violence as entertainment, and commodity fetish as aspiration. Kansas' seizure of the local woman as lover is certainly a colonial gesture, just as, more broadly, "his dream is built on flagrant aggression of another culture".¹⁴ For Kansas, Maria is nothing but a blank canvas to be filled with his sexual desires;

¹⁴ Barbara Scharres, "From Out of the Blue: The Return of Dennis Hopper", *Journal of the University Film and Video Association*, XXXV, 2 (Spring 1983), p. 28.

the other side of this process of colonisation appears when she begins to adopt the values and desires of *his* culture, and he reacts with disgust. For the expatriates who remain in the village after shooting has wrapped, including Kansas, his addled compatriot Neville Robey, the lecherous entrepreneur Harry Anderson and his lascivious wife (Donna Baccala), a night's entertainment involves taking in a sex show in a seedy club; even after the big movie show has left town, local labour continues to be exploited so that the people of the USA may continue to be entertained. This agonising scene, as Hopper employs a relatively rare long take to regard the listlessly performed sex act, becomes, for David E. James, self-reflexive, as "the show introduces the spectators to scopophiliaic pleasure," and the audience too is implicated in the exploitation.¹⁵ Furthermore, Heffernan perceives allegorical resonance in each character in the sequence, as, "Kansas, Neville and the Andersons respectively represent the cultural, military and economic wings of the American imperial project", each of which are simultaneously active (economic) participants of the exploitation of the Peruvian (subaltern) people.¹⁶

The Last Movie is one of many films from the New Hollywood moment to explore the limitations of the western genre and the idea of the closure of the frontier. Hopper's film is unique in its acknowledgement that as the expansionist conquest of the continental United States culminated in the mastery of one geographical landmass (and the subjugation of its indigenous population), while new frontiers were opened, with new indigenous populations to be displaced. The means of this new expansion would not be achieved primarily through guns and violence, but through the commodification of US culture, which is sold to the rest of the world. *The Last Movie* follows the impact that the most fundamental of American narratives, the western, leaves on a receptive local community when detached from its native context and

¹⁵ David E. James, "Dennis Hopper's *The Last Movie*", *Journal of the University Film and Video Association*, XXXV, 2 (Spring 1983), p. 39.

¹⁶ Heffernan, p. 15.

reconstituted as the site of industrial labour in the Chincheros. The Americans who stay behind in this new colony struggle to make ends meet, falling into the narrative that they have imported, idealistically adopting a familiar convention of the western genre, gold prospecting, before falling victim to the violence they have imported. The final scene of *The Last Movie* is a campfire dialogue (another western cliché) between Kansas and Robey, both of whom ramble incoherently about *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (dir. John Huston, Warner Bros., 1948), and *Lust for Gold* (dir. S. Sylvan Simon, Columbia Pictures, 1949). These two men may not have seen gold, nor do they possess the language to describe it, but they have seen movies about it.

Hopper's film is a product of the same mechanisms of cultural imperialism that it sets out to critique. Andrew Tracy eloquently conveys the ambivalence at the heart of *The Last Movie*:

[Hopper's] broadside against the American legacy of greed and violence had the backing of a major American corporation, was being made by a group of hedonistic, absurdly overprivileged tourists in the Third World, and turned on the hackneyed and narcissistic symbolism of Hopper's stuntman as Christ figure, the American naïf dying for the world's sins... [as] the apocalyptic promise of Hopper's title shuffled back into the cycle of consumption, ritual violence made routine.¹⁷

Perhaps sensing these contradictions during the 16 months he spent agonisingly editing his film, having wrapped the shoot on schedule, Hopper would conclude his *Last Movie*, as with so many other films of the New Hollywood, with a kind of cinematic death, as the film quite literally collapses upon itself.¹⁸ More daringly than the celluloid immolation that concludes *Two-Lane Blacktop*, at the moment of Kansas' death at the climax of *The Last Movie*, narrative becomes unstuck, and

¹⁷ Tracy.

¹⁸ Hoberman, *Dennis Hopper: From Method to Madness*, p. 21.

Hopper spends the final ten minutes of his film overlaying multiple layers of reality and unreality - outtakes from behind the scenes of his film, documentary-style shots of its setting, revisitations of earlier moments from the film, and the conflation of all three of its narrative strands in a deconstruction of all that has come before, as narrative falls away and, “the certainty of... ontological autonomy is withdrawn”.¹⁹

Although the length of time spent by Hopper editing *The Last Movie* into its final form suggests a degree of uncertainty as to how to structure the film (supported by the anecdote that it was at Jodorowsky’s urging that Hopper dramatically reshaped it), in 1970 Hopper told *Esquire* of his vision of a conclusion even *more* radical than the final result, recalling Hopper’s fondness for the experimental film-collages of Bruce Conner, which inspired *Easy Rider*’s acid trip. Says Hopper,

Well, first, man, I want to make the audience believe; I want to build a reality for them. Then, toward the end, I start breaking down that reality. So that it, uh, deals with the *nature* of reality. I don’t know whether I’m going to die or not at the end, but at the *very* end you’ll see lots of cuts of old movies, like W.C. Fields and Mae West and so on. Universal, which put up the money, they’ve got a fantastic old film library, man. I can do anything I want with it. Then the film jerks and cuts and tears, and you see the leader number again, so that, uh, it doesn’t matter if Kansas dies or not, it’s the *film* that dies.²⁰

It is hard to imagine another film backed by a major Hollywood studio which so completely embraces incoherence, and so mercilessly picks at the conditions of its production and its status as a commodified artwork, as does *The Last Movie*. In L.M. Kit Carson and Larry Schiller’s documentary *The American Dreamer*, which profiles Hopper during the editing of *The Last Movie*, Hopper prophetically muses on the commercial prospects of his film,

¹⁹ James, p. 43, emphasis in original.

²⁰ Tom Burke, “Dennis Hopper Saves the Movies”, *Esquire*, LXXIV, No. 3, Whole No. 442, (September 1970), p. 140, emphasis in original.

If the audience doesn't accept it, it will be a long, long, long time before we can dream about that audience I thought was there. I can become Orson Welles, poor bastard. He's been turned down by the studio that I'm making this movie for, Universal... If there isn't an audience for Orson Welles for at a half a million dollars in the universities and for the people in this country, then why are we making movies?

Hopper's statement shares the tone of Carson and Schiller's documentary, at once elegiac and incendiary. Noel King has remarked on the self-reflexive quality of the documentary (a trait it shares with *The Last Movie*), as the on-camera Hopper asks the unseen documentarians whether they require him to repeat an action or go for another take, and, "we hear the participants wonder about the pro-filmic event, the extent to which the presence of the camera... induces 'acting' rather than some more authentic representation".²¹ Moreover, the documentary simultaneously participates in the construction of the mythology of Hopper (as he espouses his philosophies on filmmaking, photography and sexuality, locks horns with a studio envoy over his almost-comical unwillingness to provide publicity stills for *The Last Movie*, and fires assault rifles in a desert shooting range), and becomes a pre-emptive requiem for the New Hollywood moment. Even the title of the film suggests a temporally-defined state (the dream), which must, at some point, end.

Hopper's uncertainty as to the existence of a commercial audience for a mainstream American avant-garde cinema, and his despair at Universal's refusal to fund a \$500 000 Orson Welles project, would prove prescient. As Hopper reflected in *The American Dreamer*, *The Last Movie* addresses some imagined, rarefied, cinema-literate audience, even as its aggressively didactic style positions it as a far more difficult prospect than Hopper's more exploitation-friendly directorial debut.

²¹ Noel King, "At Least a Witness to Myself: On watching *The American Dreamer* after learning of the death of Dennis Hopper", *Studies in Documentary Film*, 4:2 (2010), p. 112

Nevertheless, Hopper's certainty that he had produced a major cinematic work was a sentiment shared by cinematographer Laszlo Kovacs, who said in a 1970 interview with *Take One*, "I think *Last Movie* is going to be a much better film than *Easy Rider*. If you look at *Easy Rider* in terms of filmic structure, it doesn't have nearly the drama that *Last Movie* has. I know the images are better in *Last Movie*, just from seeing the dailies. And its comment is so powerful, it has such a strong symbolic story. It's going to be incredible".²²

Such optimism was temporarily validated when *The Last Movie* premiered in September 1971 at the Venice Film Festival, winning the Critics Prize. *Variety* reports from the festival were cautious, and stressed the difficulty in marketing the film: "A miss, but one that cannot be dismissed although its commercial chances call for a careful sell".²³ At the same festival, Hopper told *Variety* that Universal was not interested in *The Last Movie*, and would not market it appropriately.²⁴ Representative of this ambivalence is the studio press kit for *The Last Movie*, which, despite prevaricating with typical promotional hyperbole, does not shy away from acknowledging the tough sell the film represented:

The Last Movie is a mind-staggering experience in film that, by exposing and breaking down the traditional American approach to screen entertainment, could well result in the liberation of the audience. Not an opiate that lulls the audience with an escape into Hollywood fantasy, *The Last Movie* attacks that reality on so many levels that the individual viewer will either reject the film entirely out of insecurity or have his understanding expanded into the dawning of a new era of film.²⁵

²² Goodwin, p. 16.

²³ Gene Moskowitz (Mosk), "Film Review: Venice Film Fast Reviews - *The Last Movie*", *Variety*, 264.4 (8 September 1971), p. 16.

²⁴ Anon, "International: Dennis Hopper Unwinds at Venice Film Fest: Personal Pix Vs. Hard Dollars", *Variety*, 264.6 (22 September 1971), p. 20.

²⁵ Universal Studios, "*The Last Movie* synopsis", cited in Heffernan, p. 12.

Despite their shared trepidation about how the movie might be received, neither Hopper nor Universal could have predicted how their adversarial approach to selling the film would be met with an overwhelming tide of negativity from critics that is unmatched anywhere else in the New Hollywood. If nothing else, Hopper's film managed to generate some spectacularly vituperative lines: in reviewing what was, for him, "a hateful experience," Andrew Sarris speculated that *The Last Movie*, "was lionised in Venice simply because Europeans get orgasms from the thought that Americans are prepared to commit suicide en masse".²⁶ Stefan Kanfer for *Time* wrote that, "that sound you hear is of checkbooks closing all over Hollywood. The books belong to the smart money; the reason for their action is *The Last Movie* by Dennis Hopper - the same Dennis Hopper who recently opened the checkbooks with *Easy Rider*".²⁷ Charles Champlin went further, foreseeing disastrous consequences for the industry as whole:

Watching Dennis Hopper's *The Last Movie* is a dismally disappointing and depressing experience. As a piece of film-making it is inchoate, amateurish, self-indulgent, tedious, superficial, unfocused and a precious waste not only of money but, more importantly, of a significant and conspicuous opportunity. The cause of the adventurous young filmmaker and the cause of complete creative control for any film-maker working in Hollywood have been damaged.²⁸

Joseph Gelmis, who had attempted an early New Hollywood pantheon of his own one year previously with the publication of *The Film Director as Superstar*, saw no reason to include Hopper in his ranks of great directors, writing in *Newsday* that *The*

²⁶ Andrew Sarris, cited in anon, "*The Last Movie*", *Filmfacts*, 14/21 (1971), p. 531.

²⁷ Stefan Kanfer, "*The Last Movie*", *Time*, cited in anon, "*The Last Movie*", *Film Facts*, p. 533.

²⁸ Charles Champlin, "*The Last Movie*", *Los Angeles Times*, cited in anon, "*The Last Movie*", *Film Facts*, p. 532.

Last Movie was, “the work of a kid playing with a toy”.²⁹ Vincent Canby declared in *The New York Times* that, “Hopper has a very small vocabulary as a filmmaker, and his thoughts here have all of the impact of revelations written down during an acid trip”.³⁰ Although finding room to praise Kovacs’ photography, Canby ultimately charged that *The Last Movie*, “comes to look every bit as indulgent, cruel, and thoughtless as the dream factory films it makes such ponderous fun of”.³¹ Roger Ebert, who had been effusive in his praise for *Easy Rider* (which would later be included in that critic’s collections of writings on “Great Movies” in 1994, and again in 2004), was among the most unsparing in his condemnation for *The Last Movie*, calling it a, “wasteland of cinematic wreckage” and, “just plain pitiful”.³² In its survey of reviews for *The Last Movie*, the almanac *Filmfacts* tallied a grand total of thirteen negative, two mixed and no positive reviews.³³

Interestingly, Pauline Kael, whose impassioned defence of *Bonnie and Clyde* had proved to be a decisive moment in defining of the New Hollywood, offered one of the more even-handed appraisals of *The Last Movie*, joining Canby in praising Kovacs’ cinematography, along with Hopper, Berlatsky and Makakian’s distinctive editing (although she also considered the editing to be essentially gimmicky).³⁴ Kael was alone in the first wave of critical responses to highlight the troubling representations of race in the film, arguing that, “the Peruvians in the film are an undifferentiated mass of stupid people; not a face stands out in the crowd scenes except Hopper’s - the others are just part of the picturesque background to *his*

²⁹ Joseph Gelmis, cited in anon, “*The Last Movie*”, *Film Facts*, p. 531.

³⁰ Vincent Canby, “Screen: *The Last Movie*: Hopper Cast as a Mythic Cowboy in Work He Directed in Peru”, *The New York Times* (30 September 1971).
<<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9F03EFDB1338EF34BC4850DFBF66838A669EDE>>. (Accessed 13 December 2012).

³¹ Canby.

³² Roger Ebert, “*The Last Movie/Chincero*” [sic], *Chicago Sun-Times* (1971).
<<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19710101/REVIEWS/101010316/1023>>. (Accessed 13 December 2012).

³³ Anon, “*The Last Movie*”, *Filmfacts*, p. 532.

³⁴ Pauline Kael, “Movies in Movies”, *The New Yorker* (9 October 1971), reprinted in Pauline Kael, *Deeper Into Movies* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), p. 298.

suffering”.³⁵ Nevertheless acknowledging Hopper’s offbeat talent, and hoping that his directorial career will progress beyond *The Last Movie*, Kael levels a charge of incoherence:

His [Hopper’s] deliberate disintegration of the story elements he has built up screams at us that, with so much horror in the world, he refuses to entertain us. It would be stupid to deny that there are reasons for screaming, but I doubt if Hopper knows what he wants to do, except not entertain us, and I’m afraid he will interpret the audience’s exhaustion from his flailing about as apathy and complacency. This knockabout tragedy is not a vision of the chaos of the world - not a *Week End*, not a *Shame* [*Skammen*, dir. Ingmar Bergman, Lopert Pictures Corporation, 1968] - but a reflection of his own confusion.³⁶

Despite singling out some elements for praise, Kael concluded that the difficulty of Hopper’s film was such that, “one would have to be playing Judas to the public to advise anyone to go see *The Last Movie*,” suggesting that *The Last Movie* was too hazardous a proposition for her to endorse.³⁷ This is as telling of Kael’s own self-imposed conception of her popular critical obligations as it is of her conception of her reading public and their expectations of entertainment. Her “Movies in Movies” piece for *The New Yorker* pairs two other film reviews with her writing on *The Last Movie*, both of which demonstrate her tastes and prejudices towards the contemporary American cinema. The first of these reviews, on Peter Bogdanovich’s *The Last Picture Show*, begins with Kael describing a mainstream movie-going audience altogether tired of the experimentations of modern Hollywood: the very kind of creative freedoms which Kael’s championed in *Bonnie and Clyde*, and of which *The Last Movie*, by way of *Easy Rider*, was the ultimate beneficiary. Says Kael,

³⁵ Kael, “Movies in Movies”, *Deeper Into Movies*, p. 298, emphasis in original.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

A lot of people put the blame for the recent rotten pictures on the directors' having too much creative freedom, but what's probably closer to the truth is that the worst pictures have come about because they represent what the movie businessmen think the young audience wants. In the movie-factory days, the studio heads understood how to make acceptable trash; now the businessmen try to imitate the modern and free and avant-garde. They get hacks to imitate art, and creative freedom is blamed for the results.³⁸

There is a clear hierarchy of taste at work here, alongside Kael's cautious auteurism. Kael's complex relationship with auteurism was already established given her territorial disputes with Andrew Sarris, and her longstanding disagreement with Orson Welles over Herman Mankiewicz' claim to authorship over *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, RKO Radio Pictures, 1941). Kael's line "acceptable trash" recalls her 1968 piece "Trash, Art, and the Movies" in which she cautioned against the artistic excesses of, among other titles, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and championed the simplicity of what she believed to be the more straightforward pleasures of genre cinema.³⁹ At the bottom of Kael's cinematic pecking order are misguided attempts at profundity on epic scale under the guise of cinematic art (*2001, The Last Movie*); at the other end of her spectrum, titles such as *The Last Picture Show*, "a movie that is in some ways, and in good ways, very old fashioned".⁴⁰ In contrast to the increasingly esoteric concerns of the new American auteurist cinema, Kael states that with *The Last Picture Show*, "Bogdanovich has made a film for everybody".⁴¹ Despite its sexual frankness, *The Last Picture Show* is a classically-constructed Hollywood film, with none of the grand-scale narrative or formal experiments of *2001* or *The Last Movie*, offering instead keenly-felt, realist performances, subdued yet carefully-

³⁸ Kael, "Movies in Movies", *Deeper Into Movies*, p. 293

³⁹ Pauline Kael "Trash, Art, and the Movies", *Harper's Magazine* (February 1969), reprinted in Pauline Kael, *Going Steady* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), pp. 85-129.

⁴⁰ Kael, "Movies in Movies", *Deeper Into Movies*, p. 293.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 294, emphasis in original.

composed black-and-white-photography and an old-time sense of melodrama within a causally-motivated narrative. A wistful anguished sense of loss permeates Bogdanovich's film, which yearns to reclaim a vague, lost national innocence; this feeling is literalised in the figures that stalk the screen of the titular picture house before the ennui-stricken teenage audience: Elizabeth Taylor in *Father of the Bride* (dir. Vincente Minnelli, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer 1950), and John Wayne in *Red River* (dir. Howard Hawks, United Artists, 1948). The death of Sam the Lion (Ben Johnson) casts the entire community into a malaise from which there is seemingly no escape. Kael was enraptured by the universal appeal to common humanity in Bogdanovich's film, which she considered a refreshing change from the stridently nihilistic streak that distinguished much of early 1970s Hollywood fare that she herself helped sanction: "Our recent fiction film - especially those dealing with an earlier America - have become so full of self-hatred that, ironically, it has been only in documentaries, such as Fred Wiseman's, that one could see occasionally decent and noble human gestures".⁴² Hopper eschews such keenly-attuned attentiveness to the human condition in favour of the relentless deconstruction of the cinematic form itself in *The Last Movie*.

Kael's "Movies in Movies" piece concludes with a short review of the western/comedy *Skin Game* (dir. Paul Bogart, Gordon Douglas, Warner Bros., 1971), which she finds, "charming - utterly unimportant, but another movie that almost everybody can enjoy" - a description which casts it as lesser than *The Last Picture Show*, but superior to *The Last Movie*. Kael's hierarchy of taste prizes the lowbrow (*Skin Game*) and the middle-brow (*The Last Picture Show*), affording little merit to Hopper's loftier ambitions for what Hollywood film might be, and in turn bypassing his optimistic hope that an audience would exist for his work on the college circuit.⁴³

⁴² Kael, "Movies in Movies", *Deeper Into Movies*, p. 295.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 299.

Kael's early praise for *The Last Picture Show* would find its echo in a critical consensus of praise, which ultimately led to the film's nomination for eight Academy Awards, for which it won two, for Cloris Leachman and Ben Johnson in their supporting roles.⁴⁴

In "Trash, Art, and the Movies," Kael is unequivocal as to the brand of entertainment she demands from Hollywood cinema, extolling the virtues of *Planet of the Apes* (dir. Franklin J. Schaffner, Twentieth Century Fox, 1968), *The Thomas Crown Affair* (dir. Norman Jewison, United Artists, 1968) and *The Scalphunters* (dir. Sydney Pollack, United Artists, 1968), whilst heaping scorn upon *2001* and *Petulia* (dir. Richard Lester, Warner Bros. Seven Arts, 1968). Kael writes that it is, "preposterously egocentric to call anything we enjoy art - as if we could not be entertained by it if it were not; it's just as preposterous to let prestigious, expensive advertising snow us into thinking we're getting art for our money when we haven't even had a good time".⁴⁵ Kael's hierarchy of taste is complicated when one considers the role that she (along with Sarris and, to a lesser extent, Canby and Ebert) played in elevating the visibility of the continental European art film in the United States from the mid-to-late 1960s onwards as avenues of art-house distribution expanded. Interestingly, many of the stylistic characteristics of *The Last Movie* which would evoke, for its reviewers, the excesses of a drug-addled Hopper on a long studio leash, are directly descended from the late-New Wave works of that continental paragon of art cinema, the subject of more critical attention than any other filmic figure of the

⁴⁴ The fact that *The French Connection* would trump *The Last Picture Show* in the Best Picture and Best Director categories confirms the primacy of a director's cinema in the self-reckoning of the industry. Friedkin's film aggressively telegraphs his mastery of a flashy, hyper-stylised aesthetic, mirrored in Hackman's highly mannered performance. On the other hand, Bogdanovich's relatively subdued directorial style in *The Last Picture Show* allows its more nuanced performances to come to the fore, rendering it very much an "actor's film".

⁴⁵ Kael, "Trash, Art, and the Movies", p. 92. Although *2001* and *Petulia* were both bankrolled by Hollywood studios, both are, in fact, British films; Kael's heated derision towards both may be an extension of another cultural prejudice regarding what Hollywood film can and cannot be.

1960s: Jean-Luc Godard.⁴⁶ Such characteristics of Godard's filmmaking that are present in *The Last Movie* include the disjointed relationship between sound and vision from *Pierrot le fou*, onwards, the onscreen presence of Samuel Fuller in both that film and Hopper's, the cynical reclamation of advertising slogans and imagery in *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle* (dir. Jean-Luc Godard, New Yorker Films, 1967), the wild shifts of tone of tone and foregrounding of cinematic artifice in *Week End*, and the onscreen appearance of cinematographer Raoul Coutard and his camera equipment in *La Chinoise* (dir. Jean-Luc Godard, Pennebaker Films, 1967). This final reference itself echoes Coutard's earlier appearance at the opening of Godard's earlier *Le mépris* (dir. Jean-Luc Godard, Embassy Pictures, 1963), a move characteristic of the deep web of intertextual references and the alternating compression, explosion and deconstruction of formal elements which intensified throughout Godard's works of the 1960s, and was eagerly adopted by Hopper.⁴⁷

While Godard's films were not always the subject of unanimously positive critical reception in the United States, he was regarded by the press as a serious artist, a presupposition clearly not extended to Hopper. Reviewing *La Chinoise*, Kael positioned Godard at the very forefront of modern cinema practitioners, calling him, "at the moment, the most important single force keeping the art of the film alive - that is to say, responsive to the modern world, moving, reaching out for new themes".⁴⁸ Writing just a month before Godard's depiction of radicalised Maoist student unrest prophetically came to life in May 1968, Kael praised Godard's eye for working contemporary themes into his films, which she contrasted with the lack of stylistic,

⁴⁶ Godard's influence on the New Hollywood was reciprocal; his frequent homages to Classical Hollywood riddled throughout his earliest New Wave films are well documented, and he very nearly came to Hollywood to direct David Newman and Robert Benton's screenplay for *Bonnie and Clyde*. For detailed discussion of this abortive production history, see Harris' *Pictures at a Revolution* (2008).

⁴⁷ Godard's own reworking of western iconography in a Marxist mould, *Le vent d'est* (1970, credited to Groupe Dziga Vertov), features an extended sequence with boom and sound recorder visible on screen, much like *The Last Movie*.

⁴⁸ Pauline Kael, "A Minority Movie", *The New Yorker* (6 April 1968), reprinted in Pauline Kael, *Going Steady* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), p. 79.

narrative and thematic innovation in concurrent Hollywood cinema, which she found lacking,

The excitement of contemporaneity, of using movies in new ways. Going to the movies, we sometimes forget - because it so rarely happens - that when movies are used in new ways there's an excitement about them much sharper than there is about the limited-entertainment genres.⁴⁹

Of the Godard film that Hopper borrows most heavily from in terms of style and sentiment, *Week End*, Kael's, positive, albeit cautious review places Godard firmly within the lineage of post-War auteurs: "*Weekend* is the most powerful mystical movie since *The Seventh Seal* [*Det sjunde inseglet*, dir. Ingmar Bergman, Janus Films, 1957] and *Fires on the Plain* [*Nobi*, dir. Kon Ichikawa, 1959] and passages of Kurosawa".⁵⁰ Unlike *The Last Movie*, which she would later condemn for its misguidedly pessimistic worldview, Kael stated that, "Godard's vision of Hell... ranks with the visions of the greatest."⁵¹ Similarly, Ebert, who viewed the fragmented editing and persistent self-referentiality of *The Last Movie* as, "an elaborate rescue attempt" to save an unsalvageable mess, saw fit to praise Godard for employing the same meta-fictional devices in 1969: "no movie characters are real. No situations or dialogue are real. Isn't it more real to abandon the attempt at a story and admit that

⁴⁹ Kael, "A Minority Movie", *Going Steady*, p. 80.

⁵⁰ Kael, "Weekend in Hell", *The New Yorker* (5 October 1968), reprinted in Pauline Kael, *Going Steady* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), p. 138; on the influence of *Week End* on Hopper, both Mitchell Cohen and Joseph Morgenstern attribute the 360-degree pan in *Easy Rider*'s commune sequence to the farmyard piano sequence in *Week End*. See Cohen "'Head' to 'Gardens' via 'Easy Rider' The Corporate Style of BBS", *Take One* Vol. 3, No. 12 (July-August 1972, pub. 27 November 1973), p. 22; Morgenstern, "*Easy Rider*: On the Road", Morgenstern and Kanfer (eds.), *Film 69/70*, p. 35. However, Hopper and co. had already utilised an identical 360-degree pan in a dope smoking sequence in the contemporaneous *The Trip* (1967).

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 142.

you're a director making this movie with these actors?"⁵² In his 1969 review of *Week End*, Ebert called it Godard's, "best film, and his most inventive".⁵³

It is important to note that both Kael and Ebert were writing in praise of Godard's cinematic devices some years before the release of *The Last Movie*, and it is entirely possible that in the eyes of the critics, the impact of Godard's techniques had been dulled by their repetition. Kael alluded to such a possibility in her review of *Week End*, stating of Godard's influence on younger filmmakers,

He [Godard] has obviously opened doors, but when others try to go through they're trapped. He has already made the best of his innovations, which come out of his need for them and may be integral only to his material. It's the strength of his own sensibility that gives his techniques excitement. In other hands, his techniques are just mannerisms; other directors who try them resemble a schoolboy walking like his father.⁵⁴

This line of reasoning, however, falls flat given that despite his immense ideological and stylistic contributions to the cinema of the second half of the Twentieth Century, the very singularity of Godard's practices and concerns more often than not renders his influence diffuse rather than tangible; it is not easy to draw a direct line of influence from Godard to the films that he inspired. In fact, Godard's most visible legacy is wrought over the essay film rather than the fictional form. As far as the commercial Hollywood cinema is concerned, Godard's escalating didacticism and increasing departure from conventional narrative throughout the 1960s would seemingly be considered anathema to the imperatives of the Hollywood studios. In fact, beside Arthur Penn's *Mickey One* and, in a roundabout way, Bob Rafelson's

⁵² Ebert, "*The Last Movie/Chincero*" and Roger Ebert, "On Jean-Luc Godard", *Chicago Sun Times* (30 April 1969).
<<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19690430/COMMENTARY/110219985>> . (Accessed 16 January 2013).

⁵³ Roger Ebert, "*Weekend*", *Chicago Sun Times* (11 April 1969).
<<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19690411/REVIEWS/904110301/1023>>. (Accessed 16 January 2013).

⁵⁴ Kael, "Weekend in Hell", *Going Steady*, p. 143.

Head, both of which inspired more nonplussed responses from critics than bile, *The Last Movie* is the Hollywood film to most obviously bear the marks of Godard's influence.

By the time Hopper was attempting to synthesise the influence of Godard into a specifically American idiom, Godard himself had progressed further towards political and formal radicalism, abandoning the French film industry altogether and making projects instead for Italian television in collaboration with Jean-Pierre Gorin and others under the collective name Groupe Dziga Vertov. The anonymising of Godard's brand name as auteur under the Groupe Dziga Vertov banner rendered his directorial presence largely invisible, demonstrating instead the Marxist value of collaborative labour.⁵⁵ Clearly, these were not films intended for a popular, let alone American, audiences. Hoberman writes of their prospects that, "save for small groups of committed militants or abstruse theoreticians... most audiences found the combination of recondite ideological hectoring and austere formal rigour all but unwatchable".⁵⁶ Many of these films were indeed deemed "unwatchable" by the television stations which had produced them and were never broadcast;⁵⁷ accordingly, these works received remarkably little attention in the United States, which is particularly perplexing given the adulation showered upon Godard in the preceding decade by such critics as Kael. By 1971, Godard and Gorin were looking to a different mode of address - their 1970 *Le vent d'est* features a sequence in which Brazilian director Glauber Rocha (of *Deus o Diabolo na Terra do Sol/Black God, White Devil* [1964] fame) stands onscreen in the middle of a road, and is asked by the offscreen narrator, "which is the way to the revolutionary cinema?," a question that neither Rocha nor Godard/Gorin seem able to answer.

⁵⁵ Although as the Dogme 95 experiment shows, such stunts of false modesty as removing the director from the credits can easily draw *more* attention to the absent presence of the auteur.

⁵⁶ J. Hoberman, "Tout va bien revisited", *Tout va bien* DVD booklet (New York: The Criterion Collection, 2005), p. 7.

⁵⁷ Anon, *Tout va bien* DVD booklet (New York: The Criterion Collection, 2005), p. 21.

With *Tout va bien* Godard and Gorin attempted to reintroduce their political themes in a commercially-viable framework. The film would be their first collaboration to be shot on 35mm, credited to their own names, and featuring international stars: Jane Fonda and Yves Montand. Four years after Godard turned down the opportunity to direct *Bonnie and Clyde*, he found himself in talks to produce *Tout va bien* with Paramount, negotiations which were scuppered when the director was hospitalised after a motorcycle crash the day before he was to sign the contract in New York - an event which bears resemblance to Bob Dylan's mythical motorcycle accident and subsequent withdrawal from public view.⁵⁸ The film was ultimately financed by French company Gaumont, with reports placing the budget anywhere from \$250 000 to \$600 000; either figure would be the largest budget Godard and Gorin had worked together with.⁵⁹ *Tout va bien* tempers Groupe Dziga Vertov's didactic political sloganeering with knowing nods to Godard's early New Wave work. *Tout va bien* is Godard and Gorin's most sophisticated consideration of the intersection of the commodifying forces of capitalism with life, work, and art. In this regard, it is a spiritual successor to the thematically-similar *Le mépris*, relocated from the dream factory of Cinecittà film studios to a Parisian sausage factory, viewed through Godard's post-May '68 class consciousness. The film begins with cheques being signed, as Fonda and Montand repeat dialogue from *Le mépris*. Yet Godard and Gorin's hopes for *Tout va bien* were not to be realised, as it was greeted with outright hostility at its Parisian premiere, and "tepidly received" in New York.⁶⁰ The best Kael

⁵⁸ Hoberman, "*Tout va bien* revisited", p. 8.

⁵⁹ The lower figure comes from Robert Phillip Kolker, "Angle and Reality: Godard and Gorin in America", *Sight and Sound* (Summer 1973), reprinted in *Tout va bien* DVD booklet (New York: The Criterion Collection, 2005), p. 29. The higher figure comes from Steven Kovacs, "*Tout va bien*", *Take One*, vol. 3, no. 4 (March-April, 1971, pub. 2 June 1972), p. 34.

⁶⁰ Hoberman, "*Tout va bien* revisited", p. 9.

could find to say of it was that it was, “not as deadly in its pedagogical tone as other Jean-Luc Godard-Jean-Pierre Gorin films of the period”.⁶¹

If Godard had lost his currency with American critics by the early 1970s, it is perhaps unsurprising that Hopper’s attempts to channel the French director in *The Last Movie* may have further irked weary critics. This, however, does not account for just how comprehensively Hopper’s film was torn apart in reviews. It is possible that rather than being a problem of originality, homage, plagiarism or the over-familiarity of the Godardian device, the disjuncture between the positive critical reactions to Godard’s late-New Wave work and the lambasting of Hopper’s *Last Movie* is a product of deep-seated preconceptions about the cultural values of entertainment versus art, forged over half a century of differing conditions of production, distribution, exhibition and reception for American and European films. This debate itself is an extension of a far older awareness of, and ongoing attempt to, establish an American cultural and artistic lineage distinct from European traditions. It seems that many critics were unable or unwilling to detach Hopper’s ambitions for *The Last Movie* from their preconceived notions of the kind of product a Hollywood art film should resemble. Following this train of thought on the unclassifiable nature of *The Last Movie*, Jonathan Rosenbaum writes that its commercial fortunes were,

more or less determined by the absence of any media machinery that could accommodate a film that wasn’t protected or claimed by any predefined social constituency. Concise packaging labels were in effect necessary before a film could qualify for membership in any of the existing canons: if it wasn’t a Hollywood film or an art film or an experimental film in any obvious way, and if it didn’t adequately conform to a clear genre classification within or outside any of these categories, in certain respects it didn’t - and couldn’t -

⁶¹ Pauline Kael, *5001 Nights At the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), p.612.

exist critically at all, because influential critics at the time usually weren't disposed to create new categories in order to account for them.⁶²

Negative sentiments towards the film were further stoked by the excessive pre-release hype given over to *The Last Movie* in extensive production features published in *The New York Times*, *Playboy*, *Rolling Stone* and *Life*, coupled with Hopper's at-best eccentric personality, which often spilled over into obsessive narcissism of the type displayed in *The Last American Dreamer* documentary, reports of wildly debauched activity on set, and Hopper's prolonged editing process. These factors cast a pall over the film long before its release date, suggesting a production very much in trouble, and doing little to endear the film to the critical imagination. Yet despite lurid media reports of his prodigious drug intake, Hopper's shoot was completed on time, running just one week longer than the *Easy Rider* shoot.⁶³

Whatever the reasons behind the unanimous critical drubbing of *The Last Movie*, the damage was done, and Universal withdrew the film from distribution two weeks after its release, despite the fact that the film set a single-day box-office record at New York's RKO 59th Street Theatre.⁶⁴ Hopper, for one, blamed Universal for a lack of promotion; despite the copious on-set reports that were published throughout the shoot (many of which took a negative line on Hopper's perceived excesses), the *The Last Movie*'s Manhattan opening was heralded by a single print ad, on the day of the first screening.⁶⁵ Even more damningly, after its withdrawal from the American market, Universal never ran *The Last Movie* in Europe, despite its winning the Venice prize.⁶⁶ Nine years before *Apocalypse Now*, Hopper had already reached a filmmaker's Armageddon, testing the limits of creative expression within the New

⁶² Jonathan Rosenbaum, "'New Hollywood' and the 60s Melting Pot" (2004). <<http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.com/?p=14850>>. (Accessed 14 June 2013).

⁶³ Anon, "Dennis Hopper: Triple Threat Talent", *Movies Now*, (July 1971), reprinted in Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews*, p50.

⁶⁴ Hoberman, *Dennis Hopper: From Method to Madness*, p. 21

⁶⁵ Linderman, "Gallery Interview: Dennis Hopper", in Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews*, p.

64.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Hollywood. Hopper's career as director was essentially ended for a decade.⁶⁷ Just one year after the release of *The Last Movie*, Hopper would philosophically speculate about the reasons for its failure, and the ramifications for his career, again invoking Welles, who is something of a touchstone of martyrdom for directors wronged by the Hollywood system:

It doesn't really bother me, because I expected it to happen the first time a film of mine stubbed its toe at the box office. I just didn't think it would happen with *The Last Movie*, which I thought was going to be a commercial success. What I do dislike is the impression I ripped off Universal International for a million dollars, which is what the film cost to make. I'm not the kind of artist who says, 'I don't give a shit what I do with your money.' I feel that if you do a painting, you should at least get back what the canvas and oils cost you. If you do the Sistine Chapel - not that I have with *The Last Movie* - you may not get the costs back the first year, but eventually enough people will see it and pay for it... First, though, let me say that I'm not worried about *The Last Movie* being around when most of today's films are in dust bins. If only because of the award it won in Venice, the picture will have to be looked at again. I made what I considered an artistic film and I take full responsibility for it, and that includes responsibility for its not being a commercial success at this point. I convinced Universal there was an audience

⁶⁷ Hopper would unexpectedly assume directorial duties on *Out of the Blue* (1980), in which he was originally cast as an actor, after its original director, Leonard Yakir, left the project midway through the shoot. Under Hopper's direction, several changes were made to the screenplay, and much of the footage which had already been shot was jettisoned (see Scharres, "From Out of the Blue: The Return of Dennis Hopper", *Journal of the University Film and Video Association*, p. 31). *Out of the Blue* may be taken as the final instalment in Hopper's trilogy of sorts on the failure of the counterculture dream. Where *Easy Rider* depicted mainstream America's failure to accommodate the hippie movement, and *The Last Movie* details the corrupting powers of commercialism and cultural imperialism corroding the hippie dream, *Out of the Blue* chillingly examines members of the counterculture struggling to shoulder the responsibilities of domesticity a decade later. With Hopper's paedophilic Don in prison after slamming his truck into a school bus while drunkenly attempting to fondle his daughter CeBe from behind the wheel (Linda Manz), his wife Kathy (Sharon Farrell) languishes in a junkie stupor, and CeBe finds a revolution of her own in the nihilistic spirit of punk, ultimately reuniting the fractured family unit in fiery ritual suicide.

for the picture, and now I'm not so sure that's true. But that doesn't mean there won't be an audience for it, which is where the good story comes in. Often enough, you'll see a *Citizen Kane* ten years after it was first released and had lost money, which was also true of *The Magnificent Ambersons* [dir. Orson Welles, RKO Radio Pictures, 1942]. I could probably run down a heavy list of films we now think of classics but that no one ever saw when they first came out.⁶⁸

Hopper would later fight to regain distribution rights to the film so he could tour it on the university circuit in the late 1970s.⁶⁹ At the time of his death, Hopper was planning a DVD release of *The Last Movie*, which, at time of writing has yet to materialise, meaning that the only way for today's audiences to view the film is via illegal bit-torrent downloads, or in a low-quality rip uploaded to Youtube.

Despite its unavailability, there have been occasional flickers of serious critical interest in *The Last Movie*. One of the earliest such defences came from Foster Hirsch in 1972 in the *New York Times*, under the impassioned title "You're Wrong If You Write Off Dennis Hopper".⁷⁰ Stuart M. Kaminsky, in the column "Over Looked & Under Rated" in *Take One*, offered a reappraisal in the same year, positing that each of the film's layers of diegetic reality represents a discrete parody of an existing genre, from the Spaghetti western and, "the intellectual sentimentality of John Huston" to, "the middle-class realism of John Cassavettes... and even the self-indulgent lyrical involvement of Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper".⁷¹ Speculating on Hopper's future just a year after the release of *The Last Movie*, Kaminsky concluded that, "Hollywood will willingly feed the hand that bites it - if there is money to be

⁶⁸ Linderman, "Gallery Interview: Dennis Hopper", in Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews*, p. 60.

⁶⁹ James, p. 46.

⁷⁰ Foster Hirsch, "You're Wrong If You Write Off Dennis Hopper", *New York Times* (24 October 1972), Section II, p. 11.

⁷¹ Stuart M. Kaminsky, "Over Looked & Under Rated: *The Last Movie*", *Take One*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1972), p. 31.

made, that is to be expected. But when Hopper attacks everyone in sight - and makes no money doing it - he is doomed".⁷² Lois Palken Rudnick is equally ambivalent on this count, stating that Hopper,

wanted his movies to subvert America's consumer culture, at the same time that he wanted the kind of praise and acclaim that could only come to one who did its bidding. These conflicting - and unresolved - desires caused his film statements to be both morally and aesthetically confusing, and damaging to his own revolutionary intentions.⁷³

In one of the first major analyses of the film, David E. James writes that, "Hopper's film stands... as a comprehensive and fully articulate analysis of capitalist cinema, and the neglect it has suffered for lack of serious criticism is as unwarranted as the violence with which it was treated by its early reviewers".⁷⁴ James' article provides a detailed survey of how the film navigates its multiple layers of diegetic reality, affirming that, far from the undisciplined mess for which it is often mistaken, Hopper's film represents a multifaceted work of formal and thematic unity:

Through the systematic scrutiny of all the different aspects of filmmaking, a scrutiny in which all the various formal features of film as well as the different contexts invoked by the western as a political event are progressively reduced from fictions to reality, Hopper attains a sophistication in self-analysis in which formal considerations are revealed as inextricably combined with content and with social function.⁷⁵

Dan E. Burns, writing in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, took a very different line, offering a close thematic reading of the imagery of *The Last Movie*, arguing that Hopper's film represents an adaptation-of-sorts of *The Gospel According to Thomas*,

⁷² Kaminsky, "Over Looked & Under Rated: *The Last Movie*", *Take One*, p. 31.

⁷³ Lois Palken Rudnick, *Utopian Vistas: The Mabel Dodge Luhan House and the American Counterculture* (Albuquerque, NM: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1996), p. 205.

⁷⁴ James, p. 35.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 45.

a non-canonical Christian gospel which was unearthed in the Nag Hammadi library in 1945, and with which Hopper became obsessed during the production of the film.⁷⁶ More recently, Jonathan Rosenbaum, J. Hoberman and Andrew Tracy have all found positive things to say about the film, while Nick Heffernan, in a detailed piece for *Film International*, argues that *The Last Movie* represents a, “rare example... of daring and politically progressive Hollywood film-making rooted in ideologically problematic conditions of production”.⁷⁷ For Heffernan, Hopper’s film represents one of the most sophisticated self-reflexive appraisals of the effects of American cultural imperialism abroad, even as the film itself is both symptom and beneficiary of the lopsided power dynamics between the Hollywood film crew and the people of the Chincheros. This variety of readings suggest that, like *Easy Rider*, *The Last Movie* is a flexible text, offering itself to a number of different interpretations. At the very least, its existence points to the fact that for a brief moment in time, the rigidly codified means of Hollywood production faltered to such an extent that this film could slip briefly into the world, offering a glimpse of an as-yet unexplored intellectual appraisal of the Hollywood product itself, “the most elaborate autocritique ever produced by a Hollywood studio”.⁷⁸ The critical drubbing it received ensured that this avenue was swiftly closed, while the eventual triumph of the critically-sanctioned *The French Connection* and *The Last Picture Show* at the Academy Awards helped enshrine an alternate kind of New Hollywood, that would more accurately anticipate the works of Coppola and Scorsese than it would recall the earlier films of Robert Altman or Arthur Penn. Almost a decade before *Heaven’s Gate*, “New Hollywood’s moment had arrived and expired virtually within the

⁷⁶ Dan E. Burns, “Dennis Hopper’s *The Last Movie*: Beginning of the End”, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 7/2 (1979), pp. 137-47. The Gnostic texts of Nag Hammadi would later inspire another voice of countercultural paranoia: Philip K. Dick’s *Valis* (1981).

⁷⁷ Heffernan, p. 21.

⁷⁸ Hoberman, *Dennis Hopper: From Method to Madness*, p. 20.

duration of a single production”.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, the box-office dominance of films like *Fiddler On the Roof* and *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* attested to the fact that audiences were entirely untroubled by any of these developments, so long as they could go to the movies.

⁷⁹ Heffernan, p. 12.

PART II: *The Hired Hand*

Just as Hopper was given *carte blanche* to make his follow-up to *Easy Rider*, so too was his co-star Fonda granted creative freedom on his directorial debut, left to his own devices with a \$1.2million budget and a guarantee of final cut.⁸⁰ Mulling over potential projects, Fonda was impressed by Scottish screenwriter Alan Sharp's screenplay for *The Hired Hand*, which was, in Fonda's words, "the first western I had read that showed the life of a woman in the West of 1881".⁸¹ This aspect immediately differentiates Sharp's screenplay from the male-dominated realm of the traditional western, peering behind the curtain of machismo to consider the domestic lives of women on the frontier. Beyond its sensitive treatment of gender relations, *The Hired Hand* is a deceptively straightforward western in its fidelity to generic convention, contrasting with the exploded ambition of Hopper's *Last Movie*. Fonda favours small flourishes of formal innovation as he defamiliarises, but eventually upholds and reinforces, western tropes. Where Hopper's *Last Movie* forcibly tugs at generic convention until the film itself collapses, Fonda allows his characters themselves to question their adherence to generic ritual, while the generic mode of the film itself remains intact, retreading the familiar narrative of a weary outlaw who is drawn back into the violent lifestyle he thought he had left behind, with fatal consequences.

The Hired Hand begins with three drifters, Harry Collings (played by Peter Fonda), Arch Harris (Warren Oates) and Dan Griffen (Robert Pratt) arriving in the small town of Del Norte, which is controlled by Severn Darden's villainous McVey. After discussing their desire to leave their itinerant lifestyles behind them, and Harry's ambition to return to the wife he abandoned years earlier, Griffen is murdered offscreen by McVey's henchmen. Harry and Arch are lucky to survive the ensuing

⁸⁰ David Cochran, "Violence, Feminism and the Counterculture in Peter Fonda's *The Hired Hand*", *Film & History*, Vol. 24, No. 3-4 (1994), p 86.

⁸¹ Fonda, pp. 297-298.

confrontation with McVey, and return the next morning to take revenge, shooting their antagonist in the feet as he sleeps.

During the long ride through varied landscapes back to the family home he left many years ago, Harry confides in Arch that he fears the wife he hardly remembers may have married another man. Harry's eventual arrival is met distrustfully by his older wife, Hannah (Verna Bloom). Eager to stay on and reconcile with his family, Harry offers to earn his keep as a hired hand, while Harris remains at the homestead while he decides what his next destination will be. The two men sleep in the barn, and spend their days engaged in manual tasks, sharing meals at night with Hannah and daughter Janey (Megan Denver). As Harry and Hannah gradually mend their relationship, Harry is dealt a blow when he learns on a visit into town that during his years of absence, Hannah had affairs with other workers on the farm. Meanwhile, Arch grows closer and closer to Hannah, decides to take his leave after a confrontation with Harry, allowing the couple to rekindle their intimacy.

Harry receives a letter from his adversary McVey, informing him that he has imprisoned Arch, whose severed finger accompanies the letter. McVey states that he will release Arch in exchange for Harry, who is faced with the difficult decision of whether to remain within the newfound domestic idyll with his family, or leave them once again in order to save the life of his friend. Ultimately Harry leaves, promising Hannah that he will return. Ambushed by McVey's gang upon his arrival at Del Norte, Arch is freed in the ensuing shootout; Harry is killed, along with McVey and his cronies. The final scene of the film shows Arch returning to Hannah, who sits on the homestead porch awaiting the return of her husband.

The Hired Hand was written by Alan Sharp, who, after apprenticing in the shipyards of his native Greenock, became a novelist, relocating first to London,

where he wrote television dramas, and then to Hollywood.⁸² His first screenwriting credit was for *The Last Run*, in which George C. Scott's professional driver undertakes a cross-country criminal journey that is seemingly predestined to conclude with his own death. Undoubtedly hurt by a troubled production (including Richard Fleischer taking the reins after the original director John Huston quit on-set), *The Last Run* was poorly received by critics such as Ebert and Greenspun, who criticised both Fleischer's direction and Scott's starring performance.⁸³ Sharp would subsequently write *The Hired Hand* and later pen two of the definitive revisionist works of the 1970s: the savage *Ulzana's Raid* (dir. Robert Aldrich, Universal Pictures, 1972), and the bleak and enigmatic *Night Moves* (dir. Arthur Penn, Warner Bros., 1975), as well as later, the scrambled, paranoiac adaptation of Robert Ludlum's Cold War-era exploration of surveillance-culture, *The Osterman Weekend* (dir. Sam Peckinpah, Twentieth Century Fox, 1983), which would be Peckinpah's last. Unifying strands can be observed across Sharp's writing for film, including a tuneful ear for deadpan dialogue, and a prevailing sense of fatal predestination.

Peter Fonda's production partner, William Hayward (who was associate producer on *Easy Rider*), brought Sharp's screenplay for *The Hired Hand* to his attention, and Fonda was immediately attracted to its domestic focus and genre revisions.⁸⁴ During the earliest stages of development, Fonda envisioned his father playing Oates' Arch Harris role, a twist that would have played upon the weight of

⁸² Ronald Bergan, "Alan Sharp obituary", *The Guardian* (14 February 2013). <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2013/feb/14/alan-sharp>>. (Accessed 7 June 2013); and Bruce Horsfield, (Horsfield and Jennifer Grierson, [eds.]), "Night Moves Revisited: Scriptwriter Alan Sharp Interviewed by Bruce Horsfield, December 1979", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1983), p. 88.

⁸³ Roger Ebert, "The Last Run", *Chicago Sun Times* (22 July 1971). <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-last-run-1971>>. (Accessed 3 July 2013); and Roger Greenspun "The Last Run", *The New York Times* (8 July 1971). <<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9F00E5DC1330E73BBC4053DFB166838A669EDE>>. (Accessed 3 July 2013).

⁸⁴ Hopper would also star in an attempt to reinsert a kind of realism to the western genre, in James Frawley's *Kid Blue* (1973), in which Hopper's former outlaw struggles to adapt to the capitalist economy, and is eventually forced back into a life of crime.

generational legacy that Peter carried with him into each role as he attempted to define his own cinematic persona. When the elder Fonda demurred on the grounds that he felt he was too old for the role, Peter recalled seeing Oates alongside his father in *Welcome to Hard Times* (dir. Burt Kennedy, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1967), and decided to cast him in the Harris role.⁸⁵ Originally Fonda intended to shoot the film in Italy, but opted instead for New Mexico after finding suitable locations for the ghost town of Cabezo and the fertile ranch to which Harry's character returns.⁸⁶ Produced by Hayward for Fonda's Pando production company and greenlit for Universal by Ned Tanen, who would later oversee production on *American Graffiti* (dir. George Lucas, Universal Pictures, 1973) and *Jaws* (1975), shooting began in May 1970. Vilmos Zsigmond served as director of photography, endorsed by fellow-Hungarian László Kovács, who was unavailable due to commitments on Hopper's *Last Movie* and Paul Mazursky's *Alex In Wonderland* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1970).⁸⁷ Fonda was anxious to stake his own claim at a legacy beyond *Easy Rider*, given his claim that Hopper took more than his fair share of credit for being the creative mastermind of the *Easy Rider* project which had, in fact, originated with Fonda's late night phonecall to Hopper. Fonda's decision to shoot *The Hired Hand* against the same kind of New Mexico landscapes that *Easy Rider* passed through would do nothing to blunt the comparisons.

Easy Rider's many references to the western have been well documented: for example, Billy and Wyatt's monikers and garb, the cross-cutting from the motorcycles to equine steeds, the reversal of the westward journey, punctuated by campfire dialogue scenes in which the cinematic rituals of the western are discussed enthusiastically by the stoned Billy. Hopper and Fonda's interest in generic revisionism was clearly not expunged with *Easy Rider*. With their respective follow-

⁸⁵ Compo, p. 205.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 210.

⁸⁷ Anon, "Pictures: Pete Fonda Self-Directed", *Variety*, 258.12 (6 May 1970), p. 4; and Fonda, p. 300.

ups, each decided to work once again within a revisionist western vein. While Fonda's film is a more traditionally generic, stylistically conventional western than Hopper's genre-smashing *Last Movie*, *The Hired Hand* still bears the marks of *Easy Rider*'s influence in interesting ways. One notable parallel is Fonda's use of cross-fades during scene transitions, which diverges from Hopper's prominent use the flash cut during scene transitions in *Easy Rider*: where Hopper's flash cuts convey a twitchy, scrambled energy, Fonda's leisurely overlapping cross-dissolves suggest a more languorous state. Yet as with the formally discrete musical sequences of *Easy Rider*, the montage/cross-fade sequences in *The Hired Hand* function as recurring spectacles of visual pleasure that do not strictly advance the narrative or impart expository information, but do convey a mood and sense of atmosphere. *The Hired Hand* begins with an elongated series of overlapping dissolves depicting Fonda's Harry at play within the glistening currents of a river, set to Bruce Langhorne's score. These lengthy crossfades allow multiple images to occupy the frame, one superimposed upon another as each alternately fades from view, only to be replaced by yet another image, suggesting a hallucinatory, drugged haze of doubled/recurring experience, and the arresting of time - as opposed to Hopper's flash cuts piercing time, as premonitory glimpses of events yet to come intrude incrementally upon, and then displace, the narrative present. More broadly speaking, Hopper's use of musical sequences as self-contained spectacles of visual pleasure to break up longer scenes of dialogue and exposition finds its analogue in Fonda's similar segmentation of dialogue scenes through the use of protracted crossfades, accompanied by Langhorne's score.

As with *Easy Rider*, the soundtrack becomes an integral element of the film's formal tapestry, as narrative sequences continually give way to rhapsodic crossfade/montage sequences like the lapping eddies of memory, the repeated strains

of Langhorne's plucked banjo returning time and again almost like a sense memory, signalling that transition is now under way. Given the way that drug use became synonymous with Fonda and Hopper's public images post- *The Trip* and *Easy Rider*, it is hardly surprising that for many viewers these woozy crossfades evoked a drugged consciousness. Sharp criticised the final film for "reflect[ing] the influences of hallucinogens,"⁸⁸ while Hoberman called the film, "overtly druggy".⁸⁹

As well as adding a cosmic/hallucinatory element to each film, the montage sequences in both *Easy Rider* and *The Hired Hand* provide important structuring elements to each film. In *Easy Rider*, the montage sequences take place against the shifting backdrop of Billy and Wyatt's motorcycle journey, as California gives way to the mesas of New Mexico and the greenery of the South, each transition accompanied by a different rock song, the shifting land-and-soundscapes mirroring the shifting modulations of perpetual flight. The montage sequences in *The Hired Hand* recurrently employ stings of Bruce Langhorne's wistfully evocative score, suggesting an inexorable return to some kind of earlier state. The visual contents of the montage sequences dwell not on the excitement of cross-country travel of *Easy Rider*, but the experience of day-to-day activities on the farm. While *The Hired Hand* does feature some early montage sequences of Harry and Arch making their way on horseback to Harry's homestead, Fonda's lengthy cross-fades, and the relatively unhurried pace of horseback transit, contrast with the dynamism of Hopper's crosscutting, Kovács zooms and Steppenwolf's "Born to be Wild".

Bruce Langhorne, the musician selected by Fonda to score *The Hired Hand*, is one of the more intriguing figures of the Greenwich Village folk scene of the 1960s. An African American in a predominantly white musical milieu, Langhorne was the figure that inspired Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man," and played the electric

⁸⁸ Alan Sharp in Compo, p. 210.

⁸⁹ Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, p. 309.

guitar lead in the recording of that song, along with several other songs from Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home* album (1965). Langhorne also played with such figures as Joan Baez and Peter, Paul and Mary, and on the earlier *Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* album (1963). Where the *Easy Rider* soundtrack lacks stylistic unity, ranging from the hard rock of Steppenwolf to the electrified Americana of The Byrds and The Band, and the more unhinged psychedelia of Jimi Hendrix and The Electric Prunes, giving the impression of a sampling of FM radio circa 1969 (which is precisely how many of these songs came to occupy the soundtrack, with Hopper retaining tracks originally used for a temporary edit when they proved a good fit).⁹⁰ Langhorne's score for *The Hired Hand* displays concerted uniformity. Each of its short tracks begins with a single, simple musical figure, usually played on either acoustic guitar or banjo, which repeats, unchanging, throughout the duration of the piece, as new melodies and instruments (fiddle, flute, sitar etc.) are gradually layered on top.⁹¹ Drawing on a range of musical styles from country, folk, bluegrass and blues, Langhorne's entirely instrumental score is minimal, understated and emotionally-resonant, and would become something of a sought-after collector's item, being reissued on vinyl in a limited, hand-numbered edition by a boutique record label in 2012.⁹² Whereas Hopper's soundtrack for *Easy Rider* allowed maximal avenues of cross-promotion by repackaging a wide variety of commercially-successful pop songs, *The Hired Hand* score carefully crafts a subdued, understated soundtrack that accompanies Fonda's vision of an unhurried return to a pastoral life. The absence of vocals on any of the tracks lends a sense of anonymity to the music that reflects Langhorne's essentially marginal role as a session musician for so many better-

⁹⁰ Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, pp. 72-73.

⁹¹ Although for licensing reasons, The Band's version of "The Weight" was left off the retail version of the *Easy Rider* soundtrack, replaced with a cover version by Smith.

⁹² Anon, "Scissor Tail Editions: ST07 - Bruce Langhorne - *The Hired Hand* (LP)". <<http://www.scissortailrecords.com/2012/10/st07-bruce-langhorne-hired-hand.html>>. (Accessed 14 June 2013).

known folk musicians. In stark contrast to Hopper's rambunctious *Easy Rider* soundtrack, a principal source of commercial exploitation for that film, Langhorne's score to *The Hired Hand* lacked obviously marketable prospects, and was unlikely to attract a sizeable audience to the film – in fact, Fonda had to fight Universal to employ the musician, with the studio concerned by his lack of prior motion picture experience.⁹³

On the other hand, Langhorne's score is eminently successful in conjuring and underscoring the subdued, introspective tone of Fonda's film, providing the emotional counterpoint to its themes: yielding to the passage of time and the sensations of the world, and attempting to mend damaged relationships (within the family unit, and ritually, between men) against the foreknowledge that death is inevitable; continuing living under the shadow of mortality. The opening sequence of *The Hired Hand* conjures a somewhat misleading tone of menace and death, as Harry and Arch encounter the body of a young girl floating in the river where they are at play. This portentous, ominous opening is intensified by the deliberate withholding of the corpse's visage in offscreen space; it is never actually shown on-screen, allowing the presence of death to take on the all-encompassing, spectral quality of an omen. This morbid opening stretch stands at odds with the warm tone of much of the rest of the film, which is primarily concerned with Harry's attempts to mend his damaged relationship with Hannah. However, in the old west the prospect of violent death is never far away. Fonda often withholds vision of the act of violence itself and focuses on its consequences, as when Griffen, bleeding from a gunshot wound in his neck, unexpectedly intrudes upon a jovial moment shared between Harry and Arch in McVey's tavern, and expires upon the floor. The nonspecific totem of death in the

⁹³ Fonda, p. 315.

form of the unseen corpse at the start of the film forms a neat symmetry with Harry's inevitable death at its conclusion.

This fatalistic, existential element to *The Hired Hand* may well have been influenced by *The Gospel According to Thomas*, the non-canonical Gnostic gospel that obsessed Hopper while making *The Last Movie*, and which also exerted a fascination over Fonda during the production of his film.⁹⁴ Oates stated that Fonda envisioned *The Hired Hand* as a kind of illustration of the gospel's themes, striving to depict "how little man cares for his environment, that passing through on earth he does not pay attention to the pollution of the rivers or the air we breathe. That man considers he is more important than the tree next to him".⁹⁵ Fonda planned the opening of his film as an evocation and exploration of these nebulous themes, invoking the elemental in order to firmly establish the terrestrial realm in which the film takes place:

We used the four classical elements and signs of the zodiac - earth, air, fire and water, going from one to the other in slow motion, until finally, from the water - the water from which life first came - comes a man.⁹⁶

Shortly afterwards, the corporeal manifestation of death itself moves through these primordial waters, suggesting the inevitable end that awaits all of us at the expiration of our days in this elemental realm.

This kind of holistic dwelling within a mystical state is further realised in Fonda's performance, a continuation of his introverted, quasi-spiritual realisation of Wyatt in *Easy Rider*. *The Hired Hand* represents its protagonist's concerted attempt to return to a harmonious state: within the family unit, upon the earth, and within the terrestrial, temporal process of *being* itself. One can find the kernel of Fonda's vision for *The Hired Hand*, and his characterisation in it, from the moment in *Easy Rider*

⁹⁴ Compo, p. 210.

⁹⁵ Oates in Compo, p. 239.

⁹⁶ Fonda in Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, p. 310.

when Wyatt cryptically and impassively takes in the wondrous splendour of the earth from the precipice at the commune. As both director and actor, Fonda approached *The Hired Hand* as an opportunity to bring a new degree of naturalism to his work. J. Hoberman labels his performance as, “enigmatic and withholding”; introverted, narcoleptic, and zonked are other, equally appropriate descriptors.⁹⁷ The question at the narrative crux of the film, “what if she’s married?,” is muttered by Arch to Harry at the sixteen minute mark of the film, and is almost lost amid crossfades from close-ups of Fonda’s and Oates’ faces to shots of their silhouettes beside the campfire and the sunset. In this regard, where visual lyricism threatens to overwhelm narrative drama, Fonda’s directorial style anticipates the signature style of another key figure who would emerge in the coming years of the New Hollywood: Terrence Malick. Like Malick, Fonda uses music and montage in order to create an impressionistic sense of the totality of his cinematic world, often suppressing character psychology and motivation in the process. In this campfire sequence, the stirrings of Langhorne’s score, and the judicious length of the crossfades as the camera lingers on the faces, campfire, and sunset, does not ascribe a higher degree of dramatic significance to any single narrative element of the scene. Narratively, Arch’s question about Hannah’s fidelity during his period of absence is the key plot point, but the obtrusive music and leisurely crossfades and shots of the campfire and sunset invest the scene with a sense of rapturous resignation, rather than a drive to propel the narrative forward. Were Sharp’s screenplay to have been realised in a more classical Hollywood style, this single line would have been weighted as an important narrative point as the plot drives Harry’s return to his ranch property and his reunion with Hannah, thus arriving at the central conflict of the film’s narrative, namely how Harry is to reintegrate with Hannah’s household (the conflict with the genuine antagonist, McVey upon his

⁹⁷ Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, p. 310.

subsequent reappearance is more of a *deus ex machina* designed to deliver the film to its inevitable conclusion: Harry's death). To return to the campfire sequence, Fonda chooses to linger judiciously on the crossfades, the campfire, the sky, giving the viewer an impressionistic sense of what it may have felt like to sit around that campfire at that moment in time. Malick utilises similar techniques in both of his 1970s films, but particularly the second of those, *Days of Heaven*, which frequently turns its attention from the trivial concerns of its protagonists to take in rapturous montage sequences depicting the indifference of nature and the passage of time. A common point of contention for Malick's critics is the way in which the lyrical nature of these montage sequences completely overwhelms the thin, psychologically undeveloped characterisations of his protagonists.⁹⁸ The naturalism that Fonda strove for in his direction and performance in *The Hired Hand* similarly contrasts with his ostentatious cross-fade sequences, demonstrating Oates' observation of the folly in, "man consider[ing] he is more important than the tree next to him".

Fonda's investing his film with a strong sense of naturalism was an extension of his desire to demystify the western genre. As well as being a key theme of Sharp's screenplay, a consideration of his body of screenwriting work throughout the 1970s reveals a consistent desire to revise generic convention, from the abstracted, death-obsessed trans-continental drive of *The Last Run*, which he envisioned as a recontextualisation of the western, to the indiscriminate bloodletting of *Ulzana's Raid*, which manages to eclipse *The Wild Bunch*, *Little Big Man*, and *Soldier Blue* all in its sheer scale of misanthropy. Sharp retrospectively classified *Night Moves* as, "an attempt to use the classic detective format, the private eye, and then set him in a

⁹⁸ Describing the film that he imagined would be his subsequent project to *The Last Movie* in a 1970 interview with Tom Burke, it is Hopper, not Fonda, who conjures a vision that sounds remarkably close to Malick's *Days of Heaven*. Hopper: "I'm going to make a picture about that, man - the harvest trains that start in Oklahoma and follow the crops, same families every year, great long lines of combines and trucks moving across that flat horizon". Burke, p. 170.

landscape in which he was unable to solve the case”.⁹⁹ Similarly, Sharp’s screenplay for *The Hired Hand* brings a degree of contemporary realism to the western setting by exploring the domestic environment and de-mythologising the romanticism of the wandering cowboy by showing the consequences of the itinerant lifestyle upon his family life. Producer William Hayward stated that:

Our image of the west has been conditioned by countless television and motion picture versions -and it just didn’t happen that way. In *The Hired Hand*, we felt we had a story that had more legality [?] in it than any western I had ever read. These characters weren’t gunfighters, they were drifters, or as the sheriff calls them, ‘travellin’ men.’ There are strong relevancies to today’s troubled times and the people involved.¹⁰⁰

By attempting to instil a degree of realism to *The Hired Hand* and, in turn, reappraise representations of the family unit in the generic mould, Fonda also hoped to dispel some of the misappraisals of *Easy Rider*. Seeking to rebuild the estranged family unit, at a time when the prevailing trend in Hollywood was to court the youth-cult market with depictions of generational schisms, the alienation of the young and familial collapse, Fonda’s *Hired Hand* was certainly bucking the trend. Just as Hopper would later deny that *Easy Rider* ever intentionally glamorised the lives of its protagonists, Fonda, too, was reportedly uncomfortable that those characters had been elevated to a heroic stature by fans of the film.¹⁰¹ While promoting *The Hired Hand*, Fonda betrayed various sources of personal discomfort, complaining that young people, “have categorized me as a junkie and that’s the sort of film they expect,” and stipulating in advance of his press appearances that, “he will not do an interview

⁹⁹ Horsfield, p. 88. In this regard, Sharp’s interest in subverting the conventions of the detective genre mirrors Robert Altman’s ambition for *The Long Goodbye* (United Artists, 1973), which he intended to be “more about suicide than... about murder”. In Altman’s reckoning, his film was “a goodbye to... a genre that I don’t think is going to be acceptable any more”. See Jan Dawson, “Robert Altman Speaking”, *Film Comment*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (March/April 1974), pp. 40, 41.

¹⁰⁰ William Hayward in Compo, pp. 204-205.

¹⁰¹ Cochran, p. 86.

which requires him to wear a suit, tie or jacket and he also will not discuss his actress-sister Jane Fonda or his actor-father Henry Fonda".¹⁰² Clearly conscious of his image, Cochran believes that with *The Hired Hand*, Fonda sought, "to correct the message many had mistakenly drawn from *Easy Rider* and the spate of road movies that followed in its wake, especially concerning the rootlessness of modern life and the freedom of life on the road".¹⁰³ Continuing the revisionist tendencies that *Easy Rider* applied to the western (in which California no longer represents the end-point of westward expansion, but rather the starting-point for an eastward-bound journey to pleasures unknown in New Orleans), *The Hired Hand* also begins with a vacillation around California, which is mentioned by Harris as a potential destination early in the film, and is the suggested location of the Collings homestead. Where *Easy Rider's* journey promised debauchery funded by ill-gotten gains, Harry's return home in *The Hired Hand* is prompted by a desire for familial reconciliation and the re-establishment of a stable domestic base; early dialogue intimates that the melancholy, haunted mood that perpetually occupies Harry stems from his preoccupation with his guilt over the family he left not long after his wedding. There are some similarities here with contemporaneous youth-cult movies *Five Easy Pieces* and *Adam at 6 A.M.*, including extended montage sequences depicting the protagonist attempting to subsume his identity in the processes of physical labour: all of these films depict alienated protagonists attempting to reintegrate, to some degree, with estranged family units, but it is Harry's effort which is most sustained and sincerely intended, and *The Hired Hand* is helped by the lack of the snarky depictions of class division of both *Five Easy Pieces* and *Adam*. Oates said of the film that he respected Fonda, "showing... the family as an ideal unit," giving the film a conservative undercurrent

¹⁰² Fonda in Jack Kindred, "On Peter Fonda's Tour: Janes Needs Broadening; Delete 'We Are Criminals'", *Variety*, 264.9 (13 October 1971), p. 53; and anon, "Peter Fonda's Conditions", *Variety*, 263.9 (14 July 1971), p. 1.

¹⁰³ Cochran, p. 86.

that is largely lacking from the generally liberally-minded (and occasionally politically incoherent) New Hollywood/counterculture/youth-cult cycle of films.¹⁰⁴

As with *Easy Rider*, the violent conclusion of *The Hired Hand* squares the moral ledger of the film. Having re-established his relationship with Hannah, Harry is forced to choose whether he will remain in the “decent” family life he has worked hard to rebuild, or exercise his loyalty to his travelling companion when Arch’s life is threatened. There is a ritual element to the conclusion, as Harry returns to his gunfighting ways; once the choice is made, and his family is abandoned again, it is inevitable that he will not return. At the town of Del Norte the gunfighter Harry is slain, his devotion to violence ending his life, and defusing the tension of his strained reunion with Hannah. The mode in which violence is depicted in *The Hired Hand* contrasts with most other revisionist westerns of the period. Such films as *Little Big Man*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *Soldier Blue* and *Ulzana’s Raid* followed the lead of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch*, dwelling on copious, repetitious images of bloodletting elongated through the use of slow motion, which often had the ambivalent effect of glamourising and rendering picturesque the act of violence, rather than condemning it. Cochran observes that while Fonda does use slow motion, “in his sweeping, panoramic views of the landscape and his close-ups of actors’ faces, especially the fascinating faces of Warren Oates and Verna Bloom,” he relegates his acts of violence to off-screen space, or depicts them matter-of-factly “at regular camera speed,” with the resulting, “juxtaposition of the movie’s slow pace and the periodic spasms of violence serv[ing] to make the violence anything but aesthetic”.¹⁰⁵

In this regard, Fonda’s treatment of violence is actually closer to the unsensational

¹⁰⁴ Oates in *Compo*, p. 209. The narrative of the weary gunfighter turning his back on his violent ways in order to rebuild an approximation of the family unit would be repeated by Clint Eastwood’s early revisionist western, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. Indeed, as the early chapter on *Dirty Harry* has shown, Clint Eastwood’s career has been marked by a continued strain of ambivalence in relation to both liberal and conservative ideologies.

¹⁰⁵ Cochran, p. 90.

procedural style of Siegel's *Dirty Harry* than it is to the prevailing (revisionist) western mode of the early 1970s. Fonda himself would indicate his intentions in an interview with Cochran, stating that in *The Hired Hand* he, "wanted the violence to be unacceptable and unexpected".¹⁰⁶

The Hired Hand ends with Arch returning to the Collings homestead. The narrative significance of this gesture is left ambiguous: does Arch intend to simply inform Hannah of Harry's death, or instead assume Harry's place within the family unit? Cochran believes that, "the conclusion, in which Arch, who has no roots, gives up wandering to return to the closest approximation of a family he has ever known, represents Fonda's final renunciation of the idea that with *Easy Rider* he advocated dropping out and hitting the road".¹⁰⁷ Where the violent end of *Easy Rider* offers a morally inevitable rupturing of generic coherence, the ending of *The Hired Hand* actually fulfils the ritual functions of the western genre, with the sacrificial figure of the lone gunfighter a long-standing narrative archetype, although the clear difference here, reflective of Fonda's modesty of scope, is that rather than dying for the sake of an entire community, Harry represents only his own family, and in fact abandons them out of a higher sense of loyalty to his compatriot Arch.

While the refutation of ritualised violence in the western (or at least directors paying lip-service to such an intention) was to be expected in the revisionist cycle, the major contribution of *The Hired Hand* and, indeed, the aspect of the screenplay that first caught Fonda's attention, is its psychologically-realised portrayal of the life of a woman in the old west.¹⁰⁸ With Fonda's Harry seemingly locked in a blissful existential muddle for much of the film, and Oates' Arch left deliberately undeveloped, it is only Bloom's Hannah who takes on the stature of a believable, three-dimensional character. In this regard, *The Hired Hand* finds its starkest contrast

¹⁰⁶ Fonda in Cochran, p. 90.

¹⁰⁷ Cochran, pp. 94-95.

¹⁰⁸ Fonda, pp. 297-298.

to Hopper's first two films. The New Hollywood moment has never been regarded as a high-point for female roles - in fact, many have retrospectively identified it as a clear nadir for women in the history of Hollywood. Molly Haskell named the era, "the most disheartening in screen history".¹⁰⁹ Hopper's first two films consistently display a misogynistic streak, with the only female characters depicted in *Easy Rider* unspeaking or mono-syllabic, and entirely without psychological development, occupying roles of clear subservience, be it domestic (the rancher's wife and the women in the commune who serve Billy and Wyatt food), or sexual (the women at the commune with whom Billy and Wyatt skinny-dip, the fawning girls in the café and the prostitutes in New Orleans), while the major female characters in *The Last Movie* are Maria, an avaricious financial-drain on Hopper's Kansas, who becomes the target of his domestic violence, and the mindlessly sex-crazed Mrs. Anderson.

Even a cursory survey of all of the films considered in this thesis reveals a marked absence of robust female roles. Consider *Five Easy Pieces*, which offers at least the greatest number of female parts: Bobby Dupea comes to despise Rayette, who he considers his intellectual inferior, while Catherine, his intellectual equal, shifts from an object of sexualised desire to the adversarial target of his own tightly-wound insecurities, while his sister is shuffling and socially inept. In *Adam At 6 A.M.* Adam's love for Jerri Jo turns to contempt just as quickly; in *Vanishing Point*, Gilda Texter's character credited as "nude rider" appears naked astride motorcycle, a visage which, in Haskell's words, "unfortunately, does not turn out to be a mirage";¹¹⁰ Lauren Hutton makes a similarly unclothed entrance in *Little Fauss and Big Halsy*, before becoming the object of a sexual tug of war between the titular characters. A more chaste version of the same fate befalls Laurie Bird in *Two-Lane Blacktop*, although Bird's character is at least one of the more interesting women in this body of

¹⁰⁹ Haskell, p. 323.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 336,

films, if only because Hellman incorporates Bird's personal idiosyncrasies into the role while withholding expository information, in the process posing more question than he answers. *The French Connection* depicts Popeye Doyle cruising for anonymous sex with women far younger than himself; and the only major female role in *Dirty Harry* is that Chico's concerned wife – and a variety of nude bodies glimpsed in strip clubs and paraded before curiously open windows late at night.

In her landmark feminist film text, *From Reverence to Rape* (1974), Molly Haskell observes that in the 1960s and 1970s, the prevailing female characterisation was one of, “villainess, a conformist waiting patiently or clutching impatiently to bring the [male] hero back into the fold, to reintegrate him into the hypocritical society whose emissary she is”.¹¹¹ If *The Graduate* is the prototypical film of this type, it is a device that reappears in *Five Easy Pieces*, *Adam at 6 A.M.* and *The Last Movie*. Of the youth-cult/road movie, Haskell writes that, “in the road films, the women are lucky to be mere bodies, way stations where the heroes can relieve themselves and resume their journey,” an observation that applies to *Easy Rider*, *Vanishing Point*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* and, perhaps to a lesser extent, *Two-Lane Blacktop*.¹¹²

Just as Fonda sought to revise the glorification of youth-cult nihilism with *The Hired Hand*, he also attempted to resist the characterisation of inane, mindless female characters that had become the stereotype of the moment. Although Fonda's film begins with Harry Collings' decision to end his wandering ways and return to his family, the frosty reception with which Hannah greets him marks a shift in the dramatic structure of the film, as the source of emotional and dramatic conflict in the narrative is relocated, and the true question of the film becomes whether or not Hannah will accept his return. Fonda's Harry, like his Wyatt, is a one-dimensional

¹¹¹ Haskell, p. 336.

¹¹² Ibid.

character who carries an aura of mystique that is largely conveyed through the withholding of backstory, limited dialogue and lack of psychological development. His reasons for leaving his family in the first place, as well as the state of their relationship at the time of his departure, are left unexplored beyond cursory expository dialogue, so the audience may only guess as to Harry's motivations at any point in the film.

The character of Hannah, on the other hand, is explored in far greater detail, and Bloom's performance becomes the emotional anchor of the film. Where Harry's choice to first abandon, and then return to his family is afforded no more narrative significance than mere whims, the film weights Hannah's monologues regarding her experiences in Harry's absence with a solemn importance, establishing that rather than Harry being the hero of the film, Hannah is its tragic central figure. Hannah has been wounded by her abandonment, and has formed both a steely resilience and an emotional detachment from her situation during the years spent running the homestead and raising their young child in isolation. The film is disarmingly frank in its treatment of Hannah's sexual desires. Where Mike Nichols' *Carnal Knowledge* (AVCO Embassy Pictures, 1971) received plaudits in the same year for its unheralded, sexually-explicit dialogue, in retrospect its leering, sneering nastiness is readily apparent, whereas *The Hired Hand* has a remarkable freshness to the understatement with which sex, and a woman's sexuality, are addressed. The fury with which Harry reacts upon discovering Hannah's unfaithfulness during his years of absence is truly disproportionate to his abandonment of her in the first place, but Sharp's screenplay and Fonda's direction have the sensitivity to demonstrate how visibly conflicted Hannah is by her determination, "to continue to satisfy her sexual needs and do so on her own terms," and, on the other hand, the "psychic costs" of

meeting those desires.¹¹³ Isolated not only from her husband, but shunned by the community in which she lives as a result, Cochran identifies the tragedy of Hannah's character, a victim of her surroundings:

Hannah is not a late twentieth-century feminist transplanted into the old West. She is, rather, a product of the cultural and personal experiences drawn from living on the outskirts of a small, frontier town in the late nineteenth century. She did not want to be a self-sufficient, independent woman, but circumstances forced her to become one, successfully managing the farm for seven years without the support from her husband or the townspeople. Still, she yearns for a stable relationship with her husband.¹¹⁴

In contrast to the heavy psychological, social and sexual dilemmas surrounding Hannah's character, Fonda's Harry is positively lightweight. There are also stark differences in the ways each character is represented: Verna Bloom's Hannah is unmade-up, matronly and shot unglamorously, visually suggesting the hardships and difficult living conditions of the era, whilst Fonda's shaggy-haired, movie-star good-looks are imported intact from *Easy Rider*, his character looking far less haggard than would be expected given the arduous life-on-the-road partaken by his character in both films. As J. Hoberman writes, citing a scene in which the camera dwells fetishistically on Harry bathing before having sex with Hannah, Fonda's, "longhaired, bearded, narrow-hipped Harry is the resident sex object" of *The Hired Hand*.¹¹⁵ Molly Haskell dubs this mode of representation the rise of the "feminised male" in the films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as male stars, "appropriated characteristics that once attached to movie heroines: the glamour, the sensitivity, the coyness, the narcissism, the purity, the passivity, the self pity".¹¹⁶ The kinds of roles

¹¹³ Cochran, p. 93.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 94.

¹¹⁵ Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, p. 310.

¹¹⁶ Haskell, p. 359.

that were previously occupied by female stars were usurped by a new generation of male stars whose trademark gestures of “gentle sensitiv[ity]” and “fumbling gestures of androgyny,” displaced female stardom.¹¹⁷ In turn, female sexuality was relegated to the mindless sexpot parts of films such as *Easy Rider*. The “warts-and-all treatment” of Bloom in *The Hired Hand* represented a new, thoroughly unglamorous school of female depiction that was beginning to open up.¹¹⁸ If Fonda is to be commended for exhibiting the courage to depict a real, three-dimensional female character with complex sexual desires in Bloom’s Hannah in *The Hired Hand*, he is equally open to criticism in the undeniable narcissism of his mode of self-representation by contrast.

Hopper’s hubris regarding *The Last Movie* inevitably helped fuel the backlash that film received. It is also likely that Fonda’s perceived arrogance in his self-starring directorial debut set the tone for the way many critics approached *The Hired Hand*. Such sentiment is visible in Robert B. Frederick’s interview with Fonda in *Variety*, in which Frederick editorialises on Fonda’s,

irritating snobbism or condescension when he treats the journalist as beneath him... He [Fonda] also self-appreciates the incongruity of his standard sloppy appearance... against the posh surroundings of his Regency Hotel suite (‘Hell, Universal’s paying me more for this [the promotion tour] than they did for making the film’) - a comment known in the industry as the ‘hey, look at me dad’ syndrome.¹¹⁹

Arthur Murphy’s industry forecast of the film’s commercial prospects for *Variety* begins with, “*The Hired Hand* doesn’t work very well,” and proceeds to criticise its, “disjointed story, a largely unsympathetic hero, and an obtrusive amount of cinematic

¹¹⁷ Haskell, p. 358.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 359

¹¹⁹ Robert B. Frederick, “Peter Fonda Spews Scatology & Raps in Gabfest That’s Put-On & Put-Down; ‘They Love Me In Germany & Japan’”, *Variety*, 263.13 (11 August 1971), p. 5.

gimmickry which renders inarticulate the confused story subtleties”.¹²⁰ The critical consensus was more split on *The Hired Hand* than it was with *The Last Movie*, with an advertisement for the film appearing in *Take One* magazine quoting praise from Roger Greenspun’s *New York Times* review calling the film, “sensitive... an ambitious movie with fairly elaborate technique and levels of meaning, rising to the mystical... exciting... the images are absolutely ravishing,” and Jerry Parker in *Newsday*:

An auspicious debut for Peter Fonda, film director... Miss Bloom, who was so excellent in *Medium Cool*, here gives another sensitive performance that is just as lovely to watch. Oates... will probably make the transition to genuine stardom on the strength of this performance.¹²¹

It may well be that these were the only positive reviews studio publicists could find (and Greenspun’s ambiguous qualifier “fairly elaborate technique” indicates his own praise is qualified); many other reviews found positive elements in otherwise generally negative pieces.¹²² Charles Champlin wrote in the *LA Times* that, “Oates comes to dominate the movie by natural energy and credibility of his performance,” but his prevailing stance on the film was that while,

there are moments of considerable if irrelevant beauty... there are other moments when *The Hired Hand* begins to feel like the only feature ever made entirely in slow motion. It is cinematography gone mad, an endless succession of double and triple images gauzily superimposed and shifting and fading and lingering.¹²³

Likewise, Roger Ebert wrote of,

¹²⁰ Arthur Murphy, “Film Reviews: *The Hired Hand*”, *Variety*, 263.8 (7 July 1971), p. 14. Murphy’s criticism anticipates charges that would later be leveled at Malick, particularly his line that Fonda’s film is, “very pretty, and empty”. Murphy, “Film Reviews: *The Hired Hand*”, p. 14.

¹²¹ Roger Greenspun and Jerry Parker cited in Anon, “*The Hired Hand*” advertisement, *Take One*, Vol. 2, No. 12 (July-August 1970, pub. 4 October 1971), p. 19.

¹²² Overall, *Filmfacts* logged five favourable reviews for *The Hired Hand*, ten negative and one mixed. *Filmfacts* (1971), pp. 369-371, cited in Cochran, p. 96.

¹²³ Charles Champlin in *Compo*, pp. 235-236.

a succession of shimmering photographic images, slow dissolves, sunstruck double-exposures and camera work that seems lyrical for a Western. *The Hired Hand* is a very quiet movie, for that matter, drawing on the detached mysticism that Peter Fonda always seems to exude.¹²⁴

In what is a measured, but ultimately negative review, Ebert's criticism of the film stems from his inability to comfortably situate the film within the established generic parameters for western and youth-cult cycle:

The Hired Hand doesn't pay off for audiences looking for a Western.

Although good Westerns have always been morality plays, most of them have arrived at morality after a journey through a violent and action-oriented story. That doesn't happen here; the villain simply kidnaps the best friend, and announces he will cut off one of Oates' fingers every week until Fonda comes to rescue him. This leads to a foredoomed confrontation and to a death that is as inevitable as the deaths at the end of *Easy Rider*.

Fonda and Dennis Hopper popularized the masochistic death-of-the-hero ending in *Easy Rider*, and since then it has become conventional in a certain sort of youth movie. The Idea is that death, by its awesome finality, casts a significant light on the everyday events that went before.

Well, it does to a degree, but usually what happens is a sort of metaphysical overkill, and we're left sitting in the theatre wishing the hero had gathered his rosebuds while he could. Throwing in a death at the end of a movie is getting to be less significant and more cheap, I think; in the hands of more thoughtful directors, everyday events have their own human meanings and don't need to be gussied up by Christ symbolism.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Roger Ebert, "The Hired Hand", *Chicago Sun-Times* (2 February 1972).

<<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-hired-hand-1972>>. (Accessed 20 June 2013).

¹²⁵ Ebert, "The Hired Hand".

Ebert's review clearly indicates an exhaustion with the kind aimless death that had become a fixture of conclusions to the youth-cult movies from *Easy Rider* through *Vanishing Point*. This sentiment was reflected in the lack of patience Universal demonstrated with the film's release: as with so many films of the post-*Easy Rider* boom, *The Hired Hand* was pulled from distribution almost immediately, playing for only a week in the United States, barely given a chance to recoup its costs and establish an audience in the wake of negative or mixed reviews.¹²⁶ Universal seems to have been a particularly grievous culprit in this regard, giving short shrift to such titles as *Taking Off* (dir. Milos Forman), *The Beguiled*, *Two-Lane Blacktop*, and *Minnie and Moskowitz* (dir. John Cassavetes) in the same year as it pulled the plug on *The Hired Hand* and *The Last Movie*. Universal overzealously rushed more titles into production than other studios in its eagerness to capitalise on the youth-movie boom, and was equally quick to discard the same films when they fared less-than favourably at the box-office. Unlike *The Last Movie*, *The Hired Hand* was afforded a brief publicity tour in Europe, but when this was marred by repeated technical problems, Universal decided not to pursue a release there, effectively ending the theatrical run of *The Hired Hand*, which never made back its \$1.2 million budget.¹²⁷

Seemingly too straight for the youth-cult set, and too affected by the stigma of Fonda's youth-cult persona and affectations (no matter how keen he was to dispel them) for mainstream critics, Fonda's star persona eclipsed *The Hired Hand's* fidelity to western conventions, prompting the film to be read not as an entry in that genre, but rather as a belated grab at the flagging youth-cult cycle that Fonda was attempting to distance himself from even as the backlash was beginning to be felt. In retrospect, Fonda's film represents a yin to Hopper's yang: where Hopper ostentatiously set out to explode cinema itself in *The Last Movie*, Fonda set about revising the myths at the

¹²⁶ Compo, p. 213.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 238; and Cochran, p.86.

basis of the western genre, while being careful not to exceed the parameters of the genre's conventions. Overshadowed by the torrent of venomous hatred that was directed at Hopper's film upon its release, in the intervening decades *The Hired Hand* has enjoyed little of the serious academic reappraisal that has been extended towards *The Last Movie*, but likewise it has been released on DVD and is occasionally shown on late night television, courtesies that have yet to be extended to Hopper's misunderstood and divisive passion-project. Small-scale and modest to a fault, *The Hired Hand* has nurtured a small cult audience and some degree of goodwill, but is unlikely to ever transcend its humble position in the shadow of Hopper's more impetuous works. Given the full resources of the studio to make whatever film he wanted, Fonda's *Hired Hand* is the kind of small, personal film that is supposedly the very stuff of the New Hollywood, but thus far it has been afforded little more significance than that of a footnote whenever the films of that era are collectively appraised, being too small, too understated to be considered alongside the grand auteurist gestures that would be enshrined in the New Hollywood auteurist canon.

CONCLUSION

And as quickly as it all began, it was over. The headline of the November 3 1971 issue of *Variety* proclaimed, “Youth Shuns Youth-Lure Films,” and the article began, “another improvised ‘adage’ of the U.S. film trade is taking a beating. The vaunted ‘youth market’ is no longer dependable”.¹ Writer Addison Verrill went on to list almost thirty different youth-centric titles released during the year, none of which managed to make an impact on the box-office. In addition to *Two-Lane Blacktop*, *The Last Movie*, *The Hired Hand*, and *Drive, He Said*, Verrill also mentioned such contemporaneous but now-forgotten box-office failures as *Dusty and Sweets McGee* (dir. Floyd Mutrux, Warner Bros., 1971), *Medicine Ball Caravan* (dir. François Reichenbach, Warner Bros., 1971), and *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me* (dir. Jeffrey Young, Paramount Pictures, 1971). Verrill concluded that despite the youth market comprising 74% of U.S. cinema patronage, this audience was shunning the very titles contrived to capture and capitalise upon its presumed viewing habits. For Verrill, studio executives made a grave miscalculation in pigeonholing the projected tastes of the young audience. There is no intimation at any point in Verrill’s article that the youth-cult cycle might represent something of a renaissance – his tone is strictly pragmatic, befitting *Variety*’s status as an industry trade paper.

While Verrill was calling the end of the youth-cult cycle in late 1971, *Easy Rider* cinematographer László Kovács had expressed similar sentiments more than a year earlier, telling Michael Goodwin in *Take One*, “I was a part of such an exciting era. I feel a little like a has-been, because somehow that era is already gone”.² Even Peter Biskind’s *Easy Riders Raging Bulls*, one of the key texts in enshrining the historical conception of a decade-spanning New Hollywood inaugurated in 1967 and

¹ Addison Verrill, “Youth Shuns Youth-Lure Films: 74% of Patrons But They Stray”, *Variety*, 264.12 (3 November 1971), p. 1. Intriguingly, Verrill’s murder in 1977 would help inspire William Friedkin’s notorious *Cruising* (United Artists, 1980).

² Lazlo Kovacs in Goodwin, p16.

sealed with *Star Wars* in 1977, contains a quote from *Easy Rider* and *Last Movie* production manager Paul Lewis, stating, “the freedom that we were allowed was over with *The Last Movie*, *The Hired Hand*, and *Two-Lane Blacktop*. The end of the ’70s began at the beginning of the ’70s”.³ Both of these quotations imply an acknowledgement that the New Hollywood – or a version of it – had culminated by the early 1970s, a moment more typically remembered as the midpoint of a decade-spanning era.

My study examines several films dating from this period not just as texts, but also by considering the historical circumstances of their production, distribution and reception. *Easy Rider* is an important starting point for rethinking conventional accounts of the period. Despite incorporating many formal devices that were unfamiliar in a Hollywood context at the time, its cinematic style was typically overlooked or met with derision by critics. This did not prevent the film from becoming an enormous commercial triumph, visibly galvanising an as-yet untapped mass youth audience. A key factor that helped permit such unprecedented box-office success was *Easy Rider*’s availability for multiple interpretations, while its exploitation origins and prominently branded soundtrack provided entry points for many audience members. *Easy Rider*’s commercial success spawned a cycle of similar films, which recombined elements of Hopper’s formula in the hope of appealing to an equally broad youth audience.

While many of these films incorporated narrative and thematic elements from *Easy Rider*, most crucially failed to employ Hopper’s ideological ambiguity and exploitation cinema sensibility. The more formally-daring of these imitators were frequently abandoned by distributors before ever finding an audience. Some, such as *Two-Lane Blacktop*, eventually had their reputations repaired by new generations of

³ Paul Lewis in Biskind, *Easy Riders Raging Bulls*, p. 137.

critics, while others, such as *Little Fauss and Big Halsy*, proved too unremarkable, and lapsed into indefinite obscurity. Taken as a cycle, none of these films were seriously regarded by critics within their historical moment, and their subsequent revision into the New Hollywood canon has been a retrospective, and selective, critical process.

The related fortunes of the contemporaneous *The French Connection* and *Dirty Harry* indicates the way in which critical reception of films was heavily informed by assumptions about stardom and genre, while the fate that awaited Hopper's avant-garde *The Last Movie* effectively foreclosed the kind of studio-sanctioned creative freedom that has become a central tenet of the retrospectively-enshrined New Hollywood mythology. In the heart of what is now regarded as the New Hollywood moment, the critical establishment had already tired of the youth-cult production trend, and effectively assassinated Hopper's ambition to work with more daring formal elements inspired by European art cinema and American underground experimental film. This, in turn, limited the aesthetic parameters of the critically-enshrined New Hollywood, helping to reinforce risk averse, formally conservative production practices, an outcome that is completely at odds with conventional conceptions of the New Hollywood. But then again, *The Last Movie* bears little resemblance to the most commonly identified New Hollywood productions, and the fact that Hopper's film was essentially buried by its distributor prevented it from achieving even the kind of cult success that may have awaited it, had it been permitted to play for long enough to find its audience. Furthermore, its continued unavailability means that in the foreseeable future it is unlikely to receive the kind of reappraisal that has been extended to *Two-Lane Blacktop* and *Vanishing Point*. Nevertheless, the fact of *The Last Movie*'s existence points to the potential

elasticity of the New Hollywood banner, even as most conventional conceptualisations of the canon continue to exclude Hopper's film.

In my first chapter I discuss the youth-cult road movie cycle, produced in the wake of *Easy Rider*'s commercial success, which represented Hollywood's concerted attempt to retain a youth audience. This cycle is defined by its use of contemporary settings, its self-conscious cinematic style, its subversion of generic convention, and its downbeat endings. In addition, the films of the cycle shared similar conditions of production, predicated on the success of *Easy Rider*, and imitating, to varying degrees, Hopper's production methods. None of the entries in this cycle achieved immediate critical success or came close to the commercial fortunes of Hopper's directorial debut. Despite premeditated production imperatives to duplicate Hopper's structural formula, the fates of *Easy Rider*'s imitators were ultimately determined throughout the stages of distribution, exhibition and reception, as several of these films failed to successfully incorporate *Easy Rider*'s exploitation formula, or were neglected or abandoned at the point of distribution.

One important reason for *Easy Rider*'s success is attributable to the years that Hopper, Fonda and Nicholson had spent working in Roger Corman's exploitation stable. The commercially-minded sensibility forged under Corman emerges in the form of *Easy Rider*'s rock soundtrack, drug content and spectacularised motorcycle sequences, and in its open-ended narrative structure that appealed to a broad audience spanning the political spectrum. None of *Easy Rider*'s imitators successfully managed to recombine these elements in a similarly commercially successful manner. The eventual reappraisal of *Two-Lane Blacktop* and the belated (if limited) cult success of *Vanishing Point* can be attributed to the atypicality of these films, and their unwillingness to adhere to conventional Hollywood modes of representation and narrative convention. These atypical aspects of a small body of films that constitute

the New Hollywood as it is now popularly recognised have been retrospectively and selectively championed by new generations of critics, following Elsaesser's early lead. The more typical, and now-forgotten youth-cult artefacts of *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* and *Adam at 6 A.M.* demonstrate the continuing relevance of stardom and studio distribution during the early 1970s. Stardom had ramifications not just for initial box-office success, but for the possibility of these films to find an audience decades later, a fate that has thus far continued to consign these two films to obscurity.

Despite their similarities in theme and narrative structure, the disparate stylistic modes employed by each of these films – the austerity of *Two-Lane Blacktop*, the kaleidoscopic fragmentation and occasional detours into avant-garde modes of representation in *Easy Rider*, the self-consciously performance-oriented *Five Easy Pieces*, and the kinetic action mode of *Vanishing Point* – problematise the project of identifying a unifying cinematic style even within this self-contained cycle. Overall, at the point of production, the youth-cult cycle represents a brief bubble of deviation from conventional narrative and generic formulae, driven nonetheless by (misjudged) commercial imperatives which were promptly abandoned at the moment of distribution and exhibition. The films of the cycle often fell victim to personnel changes at the distribution companies. New executives frequently found themselves unwillingly inheriting such uncertain commercial properties. More often than not, the decision was made to let these low-budget productions die a quick death with a limited release and a minimum of promotion, rather than hedging bets by sinking further expenditure into lengthy and expensive promotional campaigns. However, the eventual rediscovery of *Two-Lane Blacktop* and *Vanishing Point* demonstrates that the road to cult immortality is long, winding and unpredictable indeed.

In my third chapter, my study of two films that blur the lines between the Old and New Hollywoods (*Dirty Harry* and *The French Connection*) considers how the critical reception that greeted those two films was steered by the same factors that determined the fortunes of the youth-cult cycle: namely, the connotations of stardom, directorial affiliation, and self-consciousness of cinematic style. These combined factors indicate the continuing power held by distributors in the early 1970s in determining the critical and commercial fortunes of these films, and the continued career longevity of their directors. In both *Dirty Harry* and *The French Connection*, the tension between the fidelity to generic convention and the auteur's interest in its subversion problematises retrospectively-held notions of what the New Hollywood film might be, by pushing the structural parameters of a genre not typically considered a part of the New Hollywood canon. Friedkin and Hackman's vindication by the Academy, twinned with Siegel and Eastwood's assassination at the hands of the press, indicate the continuing power that personality and cinematic style exerted over interpretation and critical reception. In the critical discourse, the two films were accorded widely divergent political interpretations, despite their shared thematic content. This suggests that at the point of critical reception and interpretation, presumptions of authorial intention and star ideology were projected onto the works. This in turn raises questions about the role that critical reception has played in determining the historical visibility and standing of these films decades after the fact.

Finally, in chapter four I return to the question of the limitations of film authorship in the New Hollywood by examining the careers of the creators of *Easy Rider* in the wake of that film, as the critical and commercial failures of their subsequent directorial efforts illuminate how mainstream film critics set the parameters of the New Hollywood even in the earliest stages of its canonical constitution. The possibility of those films attaining a positive critical consensus or

finding a popular audience was already foreclosed by a narrowly-defined set of critical presumptions about auteurism in Hollywood, as illustrated by the contemporaneous critical championing of the more stylistically and narratively contained nostalgia film.

What, then, would the critical establishment deem to be the limits of an American art cinema, and what degree of commitment would a major motion picture distributor extend to such challenging material? As a critical construction, the New Hollywood is predicated upon such an ambition, and yet in practice, it proved uncontainable at the point of critical reception. Clearly, Hopper's *Last Movie* was and remains too resolutely unclassifiable to sit comfortably in the company of the New Hollywood body of films, despite the widely professed proclivity of the films of that period to subvert generic convention, foreground directorial style, and telegraph countercultural affiliations, all of which are hallmarks of Hopper's film. The acclaim accorded to the *Last Picture Show* offers one answer to the question of an American art cinema, as it delivered "contemporary" content in a conservative, nostalgic style, a combination which managed to appeal to mainstream audiences and critics in equal measure. Meanwhile, Fonda's *Hired Hand* failed to generate critical or commercial enthusiasm for precisely the opposite reasons to Hopper's film. Fonda's *Hired Hand* adhered *too closely* to generic convention, was too subtle and modest in ambition and scope. Lacking the frank sexual material that earmarked both *Last Picture Show* and *Carnal Knowledge* as praiseworthy objects *du jour*, the considerably more reserved and nuanced representation of sexual interactions in Fonda's film were almost entirely neglected by critics.

In the midst of this historical moment so frequently lionised for forging distinctive creative cinematic visions, a moment which would spawn and then promptly shun both *The Last Movie* and *The Hired Hand*, Hopper expressed his own

disappointment with the state of the art (film). Asked by Lawrence Lindeman whether he would view his own films as working within the same spirit as *Faces* (Continental Distributing, 1968), a similarly iconoclastic film (in terms of production practices, if not aesthetic outcomes) by American director, John Cassavetes, Hopper replied,

You're assuming that *Faces* is an art film. Cassavetes may feel that way, but I don't. I might as well include others in here as well - Bob Rafelson, Peter Bogdanovich, Cassavetes, I don't think there's anything in *any* of their films that's revolutionary, that hasn't been done before. Of all their films, the only one that was courageous - and which was a box office disaster - was Rafelson's *Head*, which did some really far out technical kinds of things. That doesn't mean that I didn't like *Faces*, *The Last Picture Show*, and *Five Easy Pieces*. I did, yet none of them contain things that haven't been done a million times before by directors like Howard Hawks, Joseph Mankiewicz, George Stevens, John Ford, and Henry Hathaway. As a matter of fact, those movies were going back to a 1940s concept of film as a human drama that says we go from here to there, that this will happen here and then we'll go on to the end.⁴

Later in the same interview, Hopper says of his fellow American directors, "you're no longer inventing anything, you're no longer contributing to the evolution of your art".⁵ Hopper's was the sole voice to criticise his peers' inability to push the artform beyond commercially-enshrined aesthetic norms. His invocation of Bogdanovich is a useful one, casting Hopper into the unlikely company of *Variety* scribe Verrill, who concludes his prognosis of the waning audience for youth-cult films with the assertion that, "this far in 1971, nostalgia seems to be of more proven power than anything else. *Summer of '42* (dir. Robert Mulligan, Warner Bros., 1971), *The Last*

⁴ Linderman, in Dawson (ed.), *Dennis Hopper Interviews*, p. 65.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 66.

Picture Show and *Carnal Knowledge* all share that common denominator”.⁶ The nostalgic tone of these films seems at odds with the timbre of the youth-cult road movie and the countercultural underpinnings assumed of the earliest films of the New Hollywood, whereas the nostalgic content of *The Hired Hand* was too closely linked to the conventions of the unfashionable western genre for critical comfort. In sum, the critical bayoneting of *The Last Movie*, and the simultaneous acclaim for *The Last Picture Show*, calls into question whether a truly “New” Hollywood was ever possible.

The success of the nostalgic film with audiences and critics alike appears to undermine commonly-held conceptions of the thematic concerns of the New Hollywood as a whole. Contrasted with the twin failings of *The Last Movie* and *The Hired Hand*, critics’ admiration for the nostalgia film indicates that the thematic and stylistic range that might be encompassed by the New Hollywood umbrella was highly limited, and determined at the point of reception rather than production. This returns us to a major flaw in most writings on the period to date, which tend to stress that the idiosyncrasies of the New Hollywood were established at the point of production. While the fragmentation of studio production and distribution during this period has been well-documented, it does not wholly account for how the New Hollywood canon came to be constituted. The same conditions of production and distribution spawned *The Last Movie* and *The Last Picture Show*. It was the tastes of such figures as Kael and Ebert that effectively lauded Bogdanovich and buried Hopper, just as more recent figures as Hoberman and Rosenbaum would excavate and rehabilitate the reputation of Hellman, returning him to a new position of visibility. The distinctive, and distinctively different directorial voices of Hopper and Fonda, having ridden out the initial commercial success of *Easy Rider*, were effectively

⁶ Verrill, p. 48.

doomed to obscurity as the critically-constructed New Hollywood took shape around them.

Hellman's retrospective revision offers hope for the futures of Hopper and Fonda's works, however. In recent years, the influence of *The Last Movie* has reared its head not in mainstream or academic criticism, but in the avant-garde from which Hopper drew his early inspiration. James Benning retraced Billy and Wyatt's journey in the ghostly *Easy Rider* (2012). More recently, Filipino director Raya Martin and Canadian film critic Mark Peranson collaborated on *La última película* (M' Aidez Films, 2014), which simultaneously functions as a skewed, post-structuralist retelling of Hopper's *Last Movie*, a self-reflexive critique of the legacy of colonialism and its relationship with international film production, and a (post)apocalyptic reverie for the death of cinema and celluloid film. It would be a supreme irony if Hopper's ultimate legacy extends not over commercial Hollywood cinema, but over the experimental realm, given that in his day Hopper's invocation of the avant-garde was continually dismissed and overlooked by such publications as *Film Culture*.

As my study excludes films from the second half of the conventionally-enshrined New Hollywood decade, it is worth acknowledging the popularly-held endpoint of the New Hollywood narrative: the rise of the blockbuster "event film," another critical construct which is problematised when subjected to closer scrutiny. The commonly-held notion that the big-budget "event film" blockbuster was inaugurated with *Jaws* and *Star Wars* flies in the face of Steve Neale's assertion that the "annual production of a handful of big-budget blockbusters, most of them roadshown, had been established in the 1950s as a means of catering to family and adult audiences who occasionally went to the cinema".⁷ This lavish process of roadshowing lent prestige and contributed to the financial and critical success of such key, self-

⁷ Neale, "The Last Good Time We Ever Had?", in Williams and Hammond (eds.), *Contemporary American Cinema*, p. 100.

consciously “blue ribbon” New Hollywood films as *The Godfather*. In fact, the public furor around *The Exorcist* offers a different example of a New Hollywood film transcending the physical limitations of the picture theatre to become an extra-cinematic “event,” and a brandable commodity. The true legacy of this unlikely pairing of *The Godfather* and *The Exorcist* is visible also in the endless parade of sequels. Just as these original New Hollywood event films begat *The Godfather Part II* and *The Exorcist II: The Heretic* (dir. John Boorman, Warner Bros., 1977), the New Hollywood also demonstrated that the sequel, once a hallmark of the B-picture domain, could succeed both commercially and critically, leading to the release, with varying degrees of success, of such titles as *More American Graffiti* (1979), *Jaws 2* (1978) and *Jaws 3-D* (1983), *Superman II* (1980), *Superman III* (1983) and *Supergirl* (1984); and *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983).⁸

Bogdanovich’s *Last Picture Show* is a key transitional film in that it helped usher in the nostalgic tone that would become prevalent in Hollywood production in 1971. An equally important transitional work in this regard is *American Graffiti* (1973), which is a missing link of sorts between Bogdanovich’s nostalgic, pseudo-autobiographical film, and the parade of sequels that would follow *Star Wars*. Where Bogdanovich’s local cinema represents a refuge of stability for youth unsettled by a changing world, Lucas locates his safe space within the car, accompanied by the omnipresent radio broadcasts of Wolfman Jack. *American Graffiti* marks an important shift from the youth-cult road movie, in which the flight away from cities in the search of an identity (be it personal, generational, national) in the interstitial spaces of America’s highway system is rendered futile by encroaching social

⁸ Full filmographic details: *More American Graffiti* (dir. Bill L. Norton, Universal Pictures, 1979), *Jaws 2* (dir. Jeannot Szwarc, Universal Pictures, 1978), and *Jaws 3-D* (dir. Joe Alves, Universal Pictures, 1983); *Superman II* (dir. Richard Lester and an uncredited Richard Donner, Warner Bros., 1980), *Superman III* (dir. Richard Lester, Warner Bros., 1983), and *Supergirl* (dir. Jeannot Szwarc, TriStar Pictures, 1984); and *The Empire Strikes Back* (dir. Irvin Kershner, Twentieth Century Fox, 1980), and *Return of the Jedi* (dir. Richard Marquand, Twentieth Century Fox, 1983).

pressures or seemingly-fated self-destruction. In *American Graffiti* the desire to wander aimlessly is turned inwards, localised in a suburban setting over a single night. The protagonists of Lucas' film, poised on the precipice of adulthood as signified by their impending departure from Modesto for college, instead attempt to arrest the passage of time by spending it driving precisely nowhere while acting out the rituals of youth.⁹ A parallel geographical immobilisation plays out in *Mean Streets* (1973), in which the characters endlessly traverse the same New York blocks. Their frenetic movement, but lack of meaningful progress, mirrors their arrested states and inability to change as characters. Likewise, while Hopper's use of contemporary popular music in *Easy Rider* branded the film as decidedly of the here-and-now, Lucas' and Scorsese's ever-present Golden Oldies cast the viewer back into the cultural sphere of the early 1960s, each song carefully evoking the atmosphere of nostalgia that pervades the film.

American Graffiti would go on to be a major financial success, and was indeed sequelised as *More American Graffiti* (1979), while *Mean Streets* was a sequel of sorts to Scorsese's earlier *Who's That Knocking At My Door/I Call First* (Joseph Brenner Associates, 1967). Lucas, meanwhile, continued to mine his nostalgic fixation with *Star Wars*, which moved beyond *American Graffiti*'s evocation of a single historical period, and instead reworked the broader fabric of the entirety of popular culture into a tapestry of generic recombination (science fiction, the western, samurai film, war film), mythology (western Christianity and Eastern spiritualism) and cinematic allusions (to Kurosawa, Ford, Leone, Errol Flynn, and many others). *Star Wars*' sense of nostalgia comes from the shared recognition of the web of allusions, references, and homages that are recontextualised and recombined throughout. Yet the most significant contribution of *Star Wars* is its ability to

⁹ For my more extended consideration the role of nostalgia in *American Graffiti*, see Nicholas Godfrey, "Reading *American Graffiti*", *Screen Education*, 74 (Winter 2014), pp. 118-123.

maintain its presence across the decades through a vast web of merchandised permutations; it would ultimately usher in the likes of the *Transformers* franchise.¹⁰ This brings us back to the despairing territory of the Biskind-ites, and seemingly leaves us a long way from Hopper and Fonda. By 1971 the Easy Riders had already long since reached the end of the road.

The more one interrogates the composition of a decade-spanning New Hollywood, the more problematic its conception becomes, and the more crucial the mid-point year of 1971 becomes. The recognition of the fragmentation of the moviegoing audience, and the ensuing shifts in studio distribution, may be observed not only in overcapitalisation in the production of the youth-cult road movie cycle, but in other such distinct, contemporaneous film cycles as Blaxploitation and the kung fu movie. The Blaxploitation cycle would be inaugurated with the trailblazer hit *Shaft* in 1971, while the success of the kung fu films *The Big Boss/Fists of Fury* (dir. Lo Wei, Golden Harvest, 1971), *Fist of Fury/The Chinese Connection/The Iron Hand* (dir. Lo Wei, National General Pictures, 1972) and *King Boxer/Five Fingers of Death* (dir. Chang-hwa Chung, Warner Bros., 1972) in the United States would lead Hollywood to co-opt the genre in the form of *Enter the Dragon* (dir. Robert Clouse, Warner Bros., 1973). These cycles have been widely covered elsewhere, but are never discussed in relation to New Hollywood. Both Blaxploitation and kung fu are treated as marginal cinemas, both racially and within the hierarchy of aesthetic taste. Sundiata K Cha-Jua attributes the success of kung fu films in the United States to the presence of non-white protagonists, which he believes appealed heavily to a cinematically marginalised black domestic audience.¹¹ While the production and

¹⁰ *Transformers: The Movie* (dir. Nelson Shin, De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986), *Transformers* (dir. Michael Bay, DreamWorks/Paramount, 2007), *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (dir. Michael Bay, DreamWorks/Paramount, 2009), *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (dir. Michael Bay, Paramount Pictures, 2011), *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (dir. Michael Bay, Paramount Pictures, 2014), and a host of television series.

¹¹ Sundiata K. Cha-Jua, "Black Audiences, Blaxploitation and Kung Fu Films, and Challenges to

distribution imperatives that spawned the Blaxploitation and kung fu cycles seemingly point to an acknowledgement of the fragmentation of film audiences, the widespread financial success of both *Shaft* and *Enter the Dragon* actually indicates the continued existence of an undifferentiated mass audience – part of the same mass audience also turned out in droves for *Easy Rider*. Meanwhile, the dominant New Hollywood narrative remains resolutely white, male and auteurist in constitution.

Any attempt to situate Blaxploitation, kung fu and indeed the youth-cult road movie in relation to the self-consciously canonical New Hollywood narrative must also account for the continued presence of a larger, undifferentiated mass audience that simultaneously permitted the box-office triumph of *Love Story*, *Summer of '42*, *Airport* and *Diamonds Are Forever*. Typically, the New Hollywood period is conventionally narrowly written about, with the continual championing of the same small sample of movies that were neither commercially successful nor aesthetically representative of the broader period. My study has offered a historical investigation of the process by which this canon was consolidated. If the critical conception of the New Hollywood is to hold, then further inquiries along these lines must necessarily accommodate Hopper and Fonda alongside Lucas and Coppola, not to mention more marginal figures such as Friedkin, Jewison and Sarafian. This final group of directors were poised to graduate to historically-enshrined stations of auteurship but, for various reasons, never quite did.

It is indisputable that for a brief period of time in the late 1960s and early 1970s, unique production circumstances were at play in Hollywood. However, the extent to which these industrial conditions permitted an American art cinema

White Masculinity”, in Poshek Fu (ed.), *China Forever: The Shaw Brothers and Diasporic Cinema*. Chicago and Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press (2008), p.200. Further exploration of this phenomenon can be found in David Desser, “The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema’s First American Reception”, in Poshek Fu and David Desser, (eds.), *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 19-43; and David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 84.

renaissance to bloom was far from certain at the time. Nor was it the aesthetic or industrial norm for the period. Nevertheless, a select body of films would be retrospectively enshrined in the critically constructed New Hollywood. In order to re-examine this process of canonisation, I have attempted to consider not just the way in which the conditions of production shaped the formal aspects of these films, but the way in which these aesthetic outcomes and production practices were read by critics. This process of reception and criticism was critical to distribution and exhibition, playing an important role in determining whether or not a film found its audience. The eventual outcomes of critical and commercial reception would in turn influence subsequent production trends, and more gradually shape the historical account of the period, as some films passed into the canon and others were forgotten entirely. A multifaceted evaluation of this complex process is required to continue to interrogate, disentangle and refine our understanding of why, precisely, this period of Hollywood history remains so compelling and contradictory.

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