9. The Left and Right Cycles

THE RADICAL fashions of the 1960s and 1970s concealed the obvious: the traditional American mythology had survived as the generally accepted account of America's history and future. Thus, the "New" American Cinema—superficially radical, internally conservative—perfectly represented its audience's ambivalent relationship to the period's developments. Like the counterculture with its western imagery, Hollywood mobilized renovated versions of its traditional genres and heroes to satisfy the audience's schizophrenic impulses toward irony and nostalgia. Most crucially, because the thematic paradigm's myth of reconciliation had defined the popular audience's unconscious expectation of what an American movie should be, Hollywood determined to retain it, using it to structure even its seemingly most subversive films.

At times, Hollywood's new tendency to sentimentalize irreconcilability made the operations of the traditional thematic paradigm hard to direct. *The Way We Were* (1973), for example, appeared to glamorize the incompatibility of Robert Redford's Waspish diffidence and Barbra Streisand's Jewish moral earnestness, building to a romantic unhappy ending, as Redford refused to try the marriage one more time: "No, Katie, that would be wrong for both of us," he intoned. "We'd both lose." But the starkness of the film's dichotomies was undercut by the personae of its two stars. With a background in American Cinema's most conservative form (remakes of big Broadway musicals), Streisand never seemed as radical as the movie pretended. Redford's indecisiveness, on the other hand, was continually contradicted by his associations with previous action parts. Thus, the two

characters' incompatibility appeared more a plot device than a genuine expression of new pessimism.

The traditionalism of *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), one of the period's best films, also remained tacit. Superficially, the movie dramatized the gulf between an intellectual upper class (the hero's musical family) and a physical lower class (the hero's girlfriend, Rayette), polarizing the opposition in schematic North-South imagery. Thus, the spiritual aridity of Bobby Dupea's (Jack Nicholson) adopted proletarian life found its visual correlative in the hot, dusty oil fields of California, where he worked as a day laborer, lived with the pregnant Rayette, and hung out with a pal, drinking beer, going bowling, and chasing girls. His family's emotional sterility, on the other hand, suggested itself in the rainy, cold remoteness of a Puget Sound island life, and in their own physical unhealthiness (sister Tita, fat and neurotic; brother Carl in a neck brace; the father mute and immobilized by a stroke).

By making this division appear unnatural, however, *Five Easy Pieces* reconfirmed the desirability of reconciliation. Its hero was another version of Huck and Holden, surrounded by phonies whose snobbery and obtuseness had betrayed the American promise. Indeed, Bobby's own ideal blend of toughness and sensitivity merely revived a 1940s variant of the outlaw hero, the roughneck classical musician (*Golden Boy, Humoresque*). Inevitably, the conclusion, with Bobby abandoning Rayette and hitching a ride to Alaska, proved utterly traditional, another lighting out for the territory.

The surface pessimism of *The Way We Were* and *Five Easy Pieces* constituted the crucial element in Hollywood's refurbished displacement strategy. To retain its popularity with an increasingly younger audience, the industry needed to find ways of acknowledging the shocks of the 1960s in forms still recognizable as entertainment. Since the reconciliatory pattern had come to define movies for most Americans, it would be retained. Around it, however, would be embroidered reworkings of traditional genres, spiced with apparently irresolvable conflicts and nominally unhappy endings, all designed to allow the audience to assuage its conscience about cinema's inherent "escapism." For these new movies, in other words, Hollywood self-consciously reversed the

unconsciously developed pattern of the postwar period. Where the external optimism of *It's a Wonderful Life* had struggled to contain an unintentionally subversive view of American life, the blatant, self-congratulatory gloom of *Five Easy Pieces* merely reaffirmed the traditional mythology's abiding validity.

The extent of intentional manipulation in Hollywood's revised tactics is ultimately irrelevant. While Classic Hollywood's use of the traditional American mythology had certainly not been innocent, its "sincerity" (to use Godard's description) had reflected the culture's own naïve relationship to the world. By contrast, the contemporary period's self-conscious reworkings accurately mirrored the audience's increasingly ironic attempts to deal with historical events in the traditional terms.

To express those attempts, the popular American Cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s divided conspicuously into a Left and a Right. At the outset, this development appeared radical, for it involved the externalization of choice, which ceased to be an explicit subject of individual films, becoming instead an issue between the movies and their audience.

The Left cycle began first. After the 1967 success of *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, the industry followed with a series of movies intended to appeal to the counterculture's most visible elements. Nixon's election, and the surprising popularity of the old-fashioned *Airport* (1970), however, demonstrated the existence of a large conservative audience and set off a wave of right-wing films. The two categories' most popular films were the following:

Left	*Right*
The Graduate (1967)	*Bullitt* (1968)
Bonnie and Clyde (1967)	*Coogan's Bluff* (1968)
Cool Hand Luke (1967)	*Patton* (1970)
2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)	*Dirty Harry* (1971)
Midnight Cowboy (1969)	*The French Connection* (1971)
Easy Rider (1969)	*Walking Tall* (1973)
Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969)	*Death Wish* (1974)
The Wild Bunch (1969)	
Little Big Man (1970)	

McCabe and Mrs. Miller (1971)
Billy Jack (1972)
A Clockwork Orange (1972)
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975)

Superficially, these films separated the outlaw hero from the official hero, making the former the subject of the Left films and the latter the hero of the Right. Almost all the Left movies, in fact, used outlaws or outsiders to represent the counterculture's own image of itself as in flight from a repressive society. The Right films, in contrast, typically centered on cops or vigilantes engaged in war against criminals. Choice as a subject seemed to have disappeared from these films: rarely was a character forced to decide between opposed values. But in their self-righteousness and refusal to admit competing possibilities, both sets of films appeared to be arguing that a choice had been made *before* each film began, with the action that followed only the logical results of having settled on a particular set of values. Presumably, a viewer would decide which set he preferred and then attend that cycle of films. As a result, the American cinema lost its Classic Period richness: the new Left movies were *Casablanca*s without a Victor Laszlo; the new Right movies were *Liberty Valance*s without a Ranse Stoddard.

The newly polarized films elicited unusually strong reactions from audiences. Pauline Kael reported that those who saw *Walking Tall* frequently cheered "Get 'em, get 'em!" as Sheriff Pusser wielded his club in the name of law and order,[1] while hippies shouted at the end of *Joe*, "Next time we'll have guns! We'll get you first, Joe."[2] Indeed, the movies' polarization often seemed to duplicate a contemporary cultural phenomenon described by Hodgson:

> It was as if, from 1967 on, for several years, two different tribes of Americans experienced the same outward events but experienced them as two quite different realities. A writer in *The Atlantic* put the point well after the October 1967 demonstrations at the Pentagon. Accounts of that happening in the conventional press and in the underground press, he pointed out, simply didn't intersect at any point. It was as if

they had been reporting two different events. "The older reporters, who were behind the soldiers' lines, or on the Pentagon roof, or inside the temporary war room, wrote about hippies and Maoists; the kids, on the other side of the line, wrote about the awful brutality of the U.S. marshals. Each wrote with enough half truth to feel justified in excluding the other."[3]

The movies, too, appeared to be describing the same events from different perspectives. The vicious southern cops of the Left's *Easy Rider, Bonnie and Clyde*, and *Cool Hand Luke* were transformed into the heroic Buford Pusser of the Right's *Walking Tall*; the sympathetic hippies of *Easy Rider* became the psychopathic killer of *Dirty Harry*, equipped with a peace symbol for a belt buckle. Both sets of films even managed to use the Kennedy assassination for their own purpose: the final sequence of *Bonnie and Clyde*, as Arthur Penn pointed out, intentionally invoked the assassination films, to the extent of having part of Warren Beatty's head fly off when struck by a bullet. Not to be outdone by the Left's appropriation of the Kennedy martyrdom, *Walking Tall* deliberately evoked memories of John Kennedy, Jr., with its funeral sequence and its long takes of Pusser's son walking the length of a hospital corridor, carrying his father's rifle.

In retrospect, as a guide to American culture's relationship to contemporary events, these movies reveal persisting similarities between the apparently polarized Left and Right. Ultimately, of course, both shared the same mythology, with its predisposition to regard events in terms of the reconciliatory pattern's abiding advocacy of individualism. Thus, both groups tended to think of material problems as temporary crises solvable by short-term interventions. Inevitably, therefore, the Left and Right movies maintained Hollywood's stock tactical blurring of apparent differences. The wide popularity of both sets of movies (suggesting that, far from choosing between them, most filmgoers went to both) indicated that tactic's continued success.

In the Left and Right movies, the blurring process typically involved the three factors that superficially divided them: the response to the frontier's closing, the characteristics of the hero, and the willingness to acknowledge self-consciousness.

RESPONSES TO THE FRONTIER'S CLOSING

The movies of the late 1960s and early 1970s returned again and again, explicitly or implicitly, to the frontier's continuing significance in American life. In the postwar period, Hollywood's westerns had tentatively raised doubts about the mythology of space that Classic Hollywood had so often invoked. In the late sixties, those doubts grew more widespread. Politically, the willingness to concede the frontier's closing became the bedrock issue dividing the Left and Right. Ironically, the frontier, historically the figurative means for solving potential divisiveness, now proved a source of polarization. With the Right refusing to grant that anything had changed, the Left (at least in its rational mood) insisted that all frontiers, geographical and metaphorical, had disappeared, and with them, the basis for certain lifestyles, institutions, and values premised on the existence of unlimited space.

The Left's position, of course, derived from Turner's thesis, whose tacit Darwinism had linked cultural institutions to a geographic condition. The general acceptance of Turner's logic enabled the Left to see clearly outmoded institutions as symbols of the frontier's close. The Right, in contrast, sought to deny the connection. Even its faint recognitions of closure carried with them no sense of invalidation of the traditional behavior.

Inevitably, the Left movies of the late sixties and early seventies consistently suggested that America was no longer living in a frontier age. This theme's most explicit treatment occurred in the western, increasingly relocated from its traditional period in the 1880s to the decades just before World War I, a time long after the Bureau of the Census's official announcement of the frontier's passing. Thus, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* took place in 1901, and *The Wild Bunch* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* on the eve of the war itself. The latter movie even used a New York interlude to suggest progressive urbanization, and a bicycle to represent the quainter aspects of modernity. *The Wild Bunch*'s images of the new age were more vicious. One member of the gang was killed by being dragged behind a car, and the others were slaughtered by Mexican bandits armed with machine guns by a German "military advisor." *Little Big Man*, the

one major western of the decade not set in the twentieth century, nevertheless implied the West's closing by making the defeated Indians the film's heroes. Forced into more and more circumscribed areas, and eventually into reservations, the Indians became, for the first time, an image of America.

The Left's nonwesterns translated this developing sense of "lateness" into physical settings of intense claustrophobia. *Cool Hand Luke* began with tight close-ups of its hero destroying a parking meter, an urban symbol of crowding, while the main story concerned life on a chain gang. Similarly, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was set in a crowded psychiatric ward, where patients (read "prisoners") had little space or privacy. The action of *Midnight Cowboy*, despite its title, took place in a teeming New York City that symbolized closed possibilities. *A Clockwork Orange*'s hallucinatory, Skinnerian laboratory, with its looming walls and ceilings, offered a view of a world where even mental freedom had become impossible. Finally, the cramped space capsules, cloistered living quarters, and claustrophobic spacesuits of *2001* belied the new promise of outer-space-as-frontier. Instead, the film corroborated Kenneth Boulding's image of "spaceship Earth," a frequent metaphor of the counterculture:

> There is no room for "great societies" in the spaceship. It implies conservationism to the point of conservatism rather than expansionism. . . . There is no room in the spaceship for men on white horses, and very little room for horsing around.[4]

Even in movies without obviously circumscribed physical locales, Left filmmakers used other means to suggest contraction. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*'s exceptionally low-ceilinged sets made its characters appear to be living on top of each other in a crowded, Breughelian world. Similarly, *The Wild Bunch* eschewed the Fordian vistas associated with the genre in favor of tightly composed mid-shots and zooming close-ups. In *Easy Rider*, even the exhilarating openness of the landscapes was undercut by the film's West to East movement, a reversal of the traditional westward direction, that suggested the West had run out of room.

The Graduate was a special case. Like other Left directors, Nichols used extreme close-ups to suggest confinement (particu-

larly subjective shots from behind a scuba mask). But for the frontier issue, the most important aspect of the film was its location in California, the origin of the counterculture. With unending promise its raison d'être and the Pacific coastline its physical fact, California dramatized the polarization between Left and Right on the frontier issue. As Joan Didion wrote:

> California is a place where boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension; in which the mind is troubled by some buried but ineradicable suspicion that things had better work here, because here, beneath that immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent.[5]

Trying to find a career, struggling to reconcile the casual sexual impulses of Mrs. Robinson with the sternly rational advice of her contemporaries ("Plastics!"), *The Graduate*'s hero represented California, which, for the Left, represented America itself. As Left historian Peter Schrag argued, "In California . . . we ran out of time, and were thus forced to confront the unresolved ambiguities of the national imagination itself."[6]

To suggest the frontier's closing, the Left movies typically opposed their heroes (inevitably outlaws or extreme individualists) with depersonalized villains who came to represent the incessant advance of modernity. In this motif's most obvious rendering, the nameless, faceless Pinkerton men relentlessly pursuing Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid resembled a force of nature. Never seen in close-ups, they were remote but always there, and the heroes' question (at first humorous, but increasingly uneasy),"Who *are* those guys?" caught on as a counterculture tagline that summed up the Left's anxiety about the Europeanizing of America. *The Wild Bunch*, another version of the same story, allowed the audience to see the trailing bounty hunters. But by associating them with jackals, the movie made clear that, without help, they could not have caught the Bunch: the U.S. Army supporting force, deployed from trains, added the modern note of bureaucratic relentlessness.

Other Left movies worked similarly, using villains whose impersonality seemed to stand for an historical process. *Bonnie and Clyde* used the emotionless Texas Ranger Frank Hamer, doggedly

willing to cross state lines to kill his prey. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* showed its hero, a small-time would-be entrepreneur, murdered by agents of a mysterious "Corporation" who had tried unsuccessfully to buy McCabe's interests. The principal antagonist in *Cool Hand Luke* was "The Man with No Eyes," a rifleman guard on the chain gang, whose enormous mirrored glasses permanently hid his features. (This figure clearly derived from *Psycho*'s highway patrolman, looming at the window of Janet Leigh's car.) In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Milos Forman's inappropriate naturalism softened Kesey's allegorical Nurse Ratched. But Nicholson's pronunciation of the name (to sound like "rat shit") and Louise Fletcher's unsettling imperturbability restored Ken Kesey's image of her as an agent of the repressive "Combine," his metaphor for a pernicious modern society impinging on his western heroes' freedom. This counterculture paranoia peaked in *Easy Rider*, where straight society appeared as unrelievedly (and anonymously) vicious; in *2001*, where the most dangerous enemies of all were the computer HAL and (perhaps) the mysterious monoliths; and in *A Clockwork Orange*, where medical technicians controlled even the impulses of the individual brain. All these films appealed to the Left's sense of societal problems as complex, impersonal, and pervasive. In no case did its heroes oppose an individual enemy.

The Left films' implicit reliance on Turner's frontier thesis determined that the theme of confinement would find its most explicit treatment in the western. Since *Red River* (1948), the western as a form had been preoccupied with the dying out of radically individualistic lifestyles. This preoccupation intensified in the sixties (*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, Ride the High Country, Hud, Hombre*) until by the end of the decade, it had become almost the genre's *only* theme. *The Wild Bunch* expressed it most overtly: its ageing heroes, gunfighters on the eve of World War I, were obvious anachronisms. "You boys ain't getting any younger," a companion advised, and arguing against another bank robbery, the leader, Pike (William Holden), admitted, "We gotta start thinking beyond our guns. Them days is closing fast." Their opponent, Mexican bandit Mapache, equipped with a car, machine guns, and an accountant, seemed more able to adapt to

modern times. Like the Wild Bunch, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid attempted to buy time by transferring operations to a more primitive country (Bolivia) where, presumably, conditions would still permit lifestyles that had become impossible in the United States. But the promise of Latin America as a frontier proved illusory. The only safe course, as *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973) showed, involved abandoning the old ways. Asked how it felt to be on the side of the law, former outlaw Garrett could only say, "It feels different, but times are changing. I aim to get old—along with the country."

Although the outlaw remained the Left films' most common image of outmoded lifestyles, these movies sometimes pictured individualism itself as outdated. McCabe's methods, despite his whorehouse, were not illegal, but merely idiosyncratic, while Cool Hand Luke's crime was only getting drunk and chopping down a single parking meter. "Luke," his mother asked, "what went wrong?" He answered for all the Left's heroes: "I just can't seem to find no elbow room." *Midnight Cowboy* made the attempt to maintain the old order's trappings seem pathetic. Decked out in his western hat, shirt, and boots, Joe Buck was brought down to earth by Ratso: "That cowboy stuff," he sneered, "is strictly for fags." Even *Easy Rider*, with its warning "The time's running out," and its apocalyptic ending (the two bikers' random murder), suggested that certain ways of behaving had become not only impossible, but dangerous. As the small-town, ACLU lawyer George, Jack Nicholson explained how times had changed:

GEORGE: Oh, they're [people who had refused Wyatt and Billy motel rooms] not scared of you. They're scared of what you represent to them.

BILLY: Hey, man. All we represent to them, man, is somebody needs a haircut.

GEORGE: What you represent to them is freedom.

BILLY: What the hell's wrong with freedom, man. That's what it's all about.

GEORGE: Oh, yeah; that's right—that's what it's all about, all right. But talking about it and being it—that's two different things. I mean, it's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. 'Course don't ever tell anybody that they're not free, 'cause then they're gonna get real busy killin' and maimin' to prove to you that they are.

> Oh, yeah—they're gonna talk to you, and talk to you, and talk to you about individual freedom, but they see a free individual, it's gonna scare 'em.
>
> BILLY: Mmmm, well, that don't make 'em runnin' scared.
>
> GEORGE: No. It makes 'em dangerous.

This speech perfectly represented the counterculture's contradictoriness, its paradoxical glamorization of the one value (individualism) most discredited by the phenomenon it persistently invoked—the frontier's closing.

In sum, the Left films of the late sixties and early seventies used four means to suggest the passing of frontier conditions: 1) a sense of "lateness," generated by relocating westerns in the twentieth century; 2) settings that dramatically emphasized confinement; 3) anonymous, relentless forces opposing the movies' heroes; and 4) demonstrations of the anachronous quality of certain lifestyles.

Surprisingly, the Right films also used the first two motifs. With the exception of *Patton*, all employed contemporary settings, and even *Patton* explicitly evoked a sense of "lateness" by portraying its hero as the last of a certain kind of military leader. The typical Right movie, however, took place in a metropolis, especially the two with the most radical images: San Francisco (*Bullitt, Dirty Harry*) and New York (*Coogan's Bluff, The French Connection, Death Wish*). Even *Walking Tall* determinedly made its small town the symbolic equivalent of the urban landscape. "We're a big city now," the hero was told at his homecoming. "We got our own crime, vice, and lust."

The crowded, decaying cities of the Right movies implicitly acknowledged the frontier's closing. Pauline Kael, in fact, could say that *The French Connection*, like other movies made in New York, "provided a permanent record of the city in breakdown."[7] But the Right films sought to ignore Turner's logic: in them, changed conditions did not demand changed institutions, attitudes, or lifestyles. Welcoming her son home, the hero's mother in *Walking Tall* summed up the consistent Right viewpoint: "If you look around town, you might see some changes. Pay them no mind, they got nothing to do with us."

Apparently, therefore, the Left and Right films disagreed over

the third and fourth motifs. The Left cycle used its villains' anonymity as a metaphor for the complexity of modern society's problems. In *Easy Rider*, George (Nicholson) expressed the Left's sense that identifying contemporary malaise had become a baffling task: "You know, this used to be a helluva good country. I can't understand what's gone wrong with it." The Right, on the other hand, claimed to understand perfectly. In the Right films, problems had sources in particular individuals with names and faces, who could be located, tracked down, and eliminated so that society could return to normal. In the Right's view, difficulties required only an individual hero strong enough to stand up to the villain for the sake of ineffective communities.

The Right movies, of course, were urban westerns, briefs for the continued applicability of the reluctant hero story to contemporary life. Like the Classic Hollywood films they imitated, the Right movies reduced enormous social issues (war, crime, urbanization) to localized emergencies solvable by simple, direct action involving no long-term commitment to reform. Thus, the Right's plots inevitably built to man-to-man showdowns, frequently played as modern versions of gunfights.

Some Right films made the western mythology explicit. *Coogan's Bluff*'s main character (Clint Eastwood) was an Arizona sheriff trailing his enemy (a psychopathic, drug-taking hippie) to New York. The film's first half, which poked fun at Eastwood's awkwardness in the city, seemed to duplicate the Left's image of older lifestyles' new inappropriateness. "This isn't the O.K. Corral around here, you know," a reluctant witness warned Coogan; and baffled by the Arizonian's bull-in-a-china-shop act, a NYC police lieutenant asked wonderingly: "What gives with you people out there—too much sun?" But the movie's second half vindicated its hero's western-style tactics, and reaffirmed that legal niceties merely obstructed the practice of law and order.

Death Wish was another overt evocation of the western's values. With his wife murdered and his daughter driven into catatonia by three vaguely hippie attackers, the principal character (Charles Bronson) converted from his pacifist liberalism while on a trip to Arizona. Watching a staged gunfight in the streets of Old Tucson (where *Rio Bravo* had been filmed), Bronson de-

cided to use the old methods against New York's criminals. The rest of the movie involved a series of showdowns, as Bronson invited and then fought off attacks in subways, Central Park, and deserted alleys, becoming a newspaper hero in the process, and causing assaults in the city to drop by one-third. Although the grudgingly admiring police eventually asked him to leave town, the movie never portrayed him as unsympathetic or wrongheaded. In fact, he had succeeded where the police had not.

Although *Dirty Harry* kept its western references less explicit, it clearly operated from the same assumptions. By making its villain (the Scorpio killer) a lone sniper, the movie implied the stock Right position that the JFK assassination, far from representing American society's general problems, was the work of a single aberrant individual. To the role of the tough cop Harry, Clint Eastwood brought his associations with western heroes, particularly those from the Sergio Leone Italian westerns where he had played "The Man with No Name," a relentless, silent, efficient gunfighter, who merely happened to be on society's side. *Dirty Harry*'s plot mainly concerned Eastwood's attempts to ignore constraining legal proprieties (explained by a Berkeley law professor) and to deal straightforwardly with the killer. Dealing straightforwardly principally meant using an enormous revolver, which Eastwood proudly described as "just about the most powerful handgun on earth and would blow your head clean off." At the end, having ignored official orders to stay out of the case, Eastwood tracked and killed the assassin, and in a gesture of contempt for the weakness of liberal society, reprised *High Noon* by throwing away his badge.

Walking Tall was no different. Indeed, it contained, in faint disguise, nearly every standard western convention. Returning home after army duty and an aborted wrestling career, Buford Pusser discovered that his small town had become the seat of a local crime ring operating crooked gambling, whorehouses, and moonshine stills. Pusser imitated the reluctant hero's traditional unwillingness to involve himself in what he saw around him. A terrible beating, however, quickly converted him to a crusader, wielding an enormous club and hindered only by the corrupt legal system (whose corruption often involved upholding suspects'

rights). To his worried wife, he repeated Shane's explanation to Mrs. Starrett: "There's nothing wrong with guns in the right hands." Inevitably, his example roused the townspeople from their indifference and fear, so that after he had been wounded, they finished the job he had started. The film's conclusion, in fact, with the community rising up to burn the villains' headquarters, borrowed directly from *The Far Country*..

Even the subtler Right movies converted complicated situations into occasions for western tactics. With his ivory-handled pistols and his habit of shooting at enemy planes, Patton reduced the enormous complexity of World War II to a series of personal, western-style encounters: Patton versus Rommel, even Patton versus Montgomery. Like Dirty Harry, Sheriff Pusser, and Coogan, Patton found his chief difficulty not with the Germans, but the Allied leaders who imposed political constraints on his operations. Although the film portrayed Patton as an anachronism, it also celebrated him as the war's most effective general.

Superficially, then, their opposed attitudes toward the closing of the frontier and the validity of the values associated with it made the Left and Right films appear very different. In fact, however, they were remarkably similar. Both cycles carefully blurred the lines of division to enable them to straddle the frontier issue. Thus, although the Right argued for the continued applicability of western tactics, it did so in urban crime movies that constantly implied the permanent loss of the frontier conditions on which those tactics were premised. And, too, the alienated, obsessive quality of the Right's principal characters suggested the emotional and human cost of holding on to old lifestyles in a modern world. "I'm gonna take and take and take until all they've got left is blood," Sheriff Pusser said in *Walking Tall*, "and then I'm gonna take that." The Right hero rarely maintained normal human relationships, sexual or otherwise. Coogan merely used people to find his prey. Bullitt's girlfriend didn't understand his work. Patton's wife never appeared in the movie. Dirty Harry's wife was dead, and his partner quit after being wounded (Harry made it clear he preferred to work alone anyway). *The French Connection*'s Popeye had a kinky fetish for girls in boots, but no normal heterosexual dealings. *Death Wish*'s

Bronson was utterly alone. Only *Walking Tall* attempted to show its hero as a family man, but plot developments deprived him of his wife midway through the film. The traditional western had portrayed its hero as a natural man; the new western hero of the Right movies was a borderline psychotic, obviously strained by his attempt to keep up the old ways. Occasionally the Right films acknowledged their heroes' inability to solve modern society's increasingly complicated problems with direct solutions. *The French Connection*'s unresolved ending was a Left motif, as was Dirty Harry's tossing his badge away, a sign that he recognized his own out-of-dateness (a gesture ignored by the sequels *Magnum Force* and *The Enforcer*).

If the Right's position was carefully hedged, the Left's ironic stance was even more compromising. First, the Left typically dramatized the frontier's closure in westerns, or disguised westerns, whose landscapes belied the supposed loss of open space (*The Wild Bunch, Butch Cassidy, Easy Rider, Little Big Man, Bonnie and Clyde*). Indeed, these stories of confinement contained far more physical space than the Right's city pictures.

Second, and more important, the Left movies that superficially acknowledged the invalidation of western lifestyles and values typically glorified the very myths they appeared to disown. Although Bonnie and Clyde, the Wild Bunch, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, *Easy Rider*'s Wyatt and Billy, McCabe, *Midnight Cowboy*'s Joe Buck were all in one sense anachronisms with no place in a modern world, they were also naïfs, glorious throwbacks to better times, people who refused to give in to changed conditions. Peckinpah's admiration for his heroes, Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, expressed the viewpoint of the entire cycle: "These are cats who ran out of territory and know it. But they don't bend, refuse to be diminished by it. They play their string out to the end."[8] Thus, despite their overt intent to discredit frontier values, the Left movies affirmed such values more convincingly than the Right films, with their affectless cops.

The Left cycle glamorized its heroes in several ways. First, the Left heroes, almost always played by the films' only stars, never encountered appealing characters with opposed points of view. None of these movies offered the corrective to the outlaw-hero

values represented by *Casablanca*'s Victor Laszlo, *Red River*'s Matthew Garth, or *Liberty Valance*'s Ranse Stoddard. Instead, Bonnie and Clyde, the Wild Bunch, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and the others seemed to exist in worlds mysteriously emptied of alternatives. Noble outlawry confronted the impersonal villainy of nameless pursuers and invisible "Corporations" and "Combines"—no middle ground existed. Unlike the traditional western loner, who had been tempered by the communities he passed through (as Wyatt Earp had been in *My Darling Clementine*), these heroes lived in a world to themselves. Those that they encountered from normal society were inevitably caricatures—silly, lifeless people (e.g., the undertaker and his fiancée kidnapped by Bonnie and Clyde), never as likable as the witty, energetic outlaws.

The Left cycle even regarded sympathetically its heroes' violence, portraying it as the last possible expression of individual freedom. This romanticization, implicit in *The Wild Bunch*'s ending, became *A Clockwork Orange*'s explicit argument, and lay behind the willingness to tolerate Wyatt and Billy's drug-dealing in *Easy Rider*, and McMurphy's whoring, boozing, and brawling in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. In *Bonnie and Clyde*, where the outlaws' violence was clearly not self-expression (although perhaps compensation for sexual inadequacy), it appeared accidental, more the fault of victims who failed to "understand" than of the criminal who was only trying "to be free." "He tried to kill me," Clyde said in amazement after shooting a butcher who had defended himself from a holdup. "Why'd he try to kill me? I didn't want to hurt him. Try to get something to eat round here and some son-of-a-bitch comes up on you with a meat cleaver. I ain't against him. I ain't against him."

Even the Left films' violent endings glorified supposedly invalidated values. Ironically, once-radical New Wave devices became the means to apotheosize heroes who clearly embodied the traditional mythology: a freeze frame in *Butch Cassidy*; slow-motion slaughters in *The Wild Bunch* and *Bonnie and Clyde*; a soft-focus, fractured shootout in the snow in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*; counterpointing music from Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* ("I was cured all right") in *A Clockwork Orange*; and a

slow upwardly spiraling helicopter shot in *Easy Rider.* In aestheticizing its heroes' deaths, the Left cycle perpetuated the values it had nominally discredited: individualism, self-sufficiency, and escapism. In doing so, it further blurred the distinctions between itself and the Right.

To see how excessive sympathy for its heroes compromised the Left's films, one had only to look at *Chinatown,* a movie that employed all the Left's images of contraction without glamorizing its hero. The film's plot, involving a water-rights swindle in 1930s Los Angeles, expressed a rudimentary ecological sense—the days of abundant natural resources had evidently passed. To imply this loss, Roman Polanski made the movie unrelentingly claustrophobic, filled with close-ups and tight compositions. Significantly, too, the source of evil was not individual, but a byzantine network of corruption resisting the detective's flip, overly confident explanations, continually revised, and just as continually proved false. By clearly overmatching the detective, *Chinatown* exposed his individualistic modus operandi as obsolete. But unlike the standard Left movie, *Chinatown* refused to dignify its anachronistic hero. In fact, Nicholson (as the detective) played the film's entire second half equipped with an enormous bandage on his nose (to protect a knife wound) that rendered him always slightly ludicrous, the unknowing butt of a black joke. Interestingly, *Chinatown,* despite being nominated for Best Picture of the Year, failed to make *Variety*'s Top Twenty Box-Office Attractions.

The widely popular movies of the Left and Right cycles *did* make *Variety*'s list. They did so by continuing to allow the audience to have things both ways. The Right provided old-style western stories in contemporary urban settings, thus paying lip service to the frontier's passing. The Left provided glorifications of attitudes that its stories of closed frontiers implicitly discredited. The popular audience could go to either series—or both—and remain comfortable.

HEROES OF THE LEFT AND RIGHT

The Left and Right films of the late sixties and early seventies superficially polarized into outlaw-hero movies and official-hero

movies. The Left's principal characters clearly stood outside the law, while the Right's were nominally its representatives: cops, vigilantes, and a general. But as with the frontier issue, the films blurred this point of distinction to confirm the fundamental similarities between the two cycles.

The Left films appeared to celebrate the values and attitudes traditionally associated with individualism: a dislike of institutions, a need for freedom from restraints, a preference for intuition and spontaneity as a source of conduct, a reluctance to settle down, a distrust of marriage, and a playfulness that suggested a resistance to growing up. All the Left movies had heroes who embodied these attitudes. *The Graduate*, the cycle's first film, was clearly an "us-against-them" story, designed for the youth audience revolting against its parents. Benjamin's indecisiveness indicated not his feckless immaturity, but his grace. *Bonnie and Clyde* portrayed charming young people who drifted casually into crime, perhaps to impress a girl, perhaps to get a ride in a fast car. Even decisive actions sprang from whim. The Wild Bunch had no plan to rescue Angel from Mapache; its leader, Pike, merely shrugged his shoulders and said, "What the hell, let's go." *Easy Rider*'s two heroes (whose names, Wyatt and Billy, linked them to the western tradition of Earp and The Kid) refused an invitation to remain at a commune:

COMMUNE MEMBER: You know, this could be the right place. The time's running out.
BILLY: Hey, man. Hey! If we're goin', we're goin'. Let's go.
WYATT: Yeah, I'm—I'm hip about time. But I just gotta go.

None of the Left's heroes was married or had a settled home. Cool Hand Luke, it seemed, had been married, but his mother approved of his divorce: "The idea of marrying got you all bollixed up," she told him. "Tryin' to be respectable. You was boring the hell out of all of us." The other Left figures were generally sexist, resorting to whores (*The Wild Bunch, Easy Rider, McCabe and Mrs. Miller, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*), or rape (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, A Clockwork Orange*), or at times, complete disinterest (*Midnight Cowboy*). Even the *ménage à trois* of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* concerned itself

mainly with the two males. (Sundance: "What're you doing?" Butch: "Stealin' your girl." Sundance: "Take her, take her.")

The Left films clearly intended their outlaw heroes to represent the counterculture's own romanticized image of itself. As Robin Wood wrote about *Bonnie and Clyde*:

> Penn romanticizes Bonnie and Clyde. . . . uses them . . . as representatives of a spontaneous-intuitive aliveness that society even at its best can contain with difficulty or not at all: an aliveness that expresses itself in the overthrowing of restrictions, in asocial, amoral freedom and irresponsibility.[9]

Penn frankly admitted his intentional use of western mythology (with cars substituted for horses) and his efforts to identify Bonnie and Clyde with Robin Hood. Scriptwriters Benton and Newman made the counterculture connection explicit:

> What we now call "the underground," what the hip people do and feel, stems in great part from that "underworld" [of 1930s gangs].
>
> If Bonnie and Clyde were here today, they would be hip. Their values would have become assimilated in much of our culture—not robbing banks and killing people, of course, but their style, their sexuality, their bravado, their delicacy, their cultivated arrogance, their narcissistic insecurity, their curious ambition have relevance to the way we live now. . . .
>
> They are not crooks. They are people, and this film is, in many ways, about what's going on now.[10]

The heroes of the Right movies were, by contrast, mostly policemen, the counterculture's archvillains. Only Patton and *Death Wish*'s hero were not cops, but Patton was worse, a hawkish general, and *Death Wish*'s avenger won the respect of the police themselves.

In practice, the two cycles' free exchange of plots and motifs minimized their apparent differences. Thus, like the counterculture itself (which had cavalierly mixed individual and communal values), the Left films established a new variation by employing an element traditionally basic to official attitudes: a sense of community. The standard western hero (e.g., Shane) had been a loner. The new outlaws came in groups: Bonnie and Clyde, Butch and Sundance, Wyatt and Billy, Alex and his gang (*A Clockwork Orange*). "Partners is what I came up here to get away from,"

McCabe said, and promptly took a partner, Mrs. Miller. Asked whether they were associated with the U.S. Army, the Wild Bunch's Dutch shot back, "We're not associated with anybody," but the movie specified a particular code that bound the group together. "We're gonna stick together, all of us," Pike ordered. "When you side with a man you stick with him till he's finished or else you're nothing but some kind of animal." The Barrow Gang made up a small, traveling family, a fact the movie humorously acknowledged with its scenes of bickering and nagging. Similarly, the alternative to road life in *Easy Rider* was the extended family of the commune, romanticized and filmed in soft focus.

If the Left's outlaws were unusually community-oriented, the Right's characters, nominally official heroes, were extraordinarily alone. Like their Left counterparts, none had real homes, none had real friends, and none (except in *Walking Tall*) had real relationships with women. Even more significantly, all of them displayed the outlaw hero's abiding distrust of the law. As cops, Coogan, Dirty Harry, Sheriff Pusser, Popeye, and Bullitt were hampered by superiors who continually raised issues of legality. In *Death Wish*, the law appeared helpless in the face of the rampant Manhattan street crime. Patton's nemesis was a kind of international decorum that allowed the British to win some of the glory (and thus to move ahead of Patton's own army), but prevented a postwar attack on the Russians (a move favored by Patton). The evident calculation behind this blurring of distinctions between Left and Right heroes appeared explicitly in the advertisements for *Patton*. "*Patton*: A Salute to a Rebel," the posters read, and in the not-so-fine print below:

> Patton was a rebel. Long before it became fashionable. He rebelled against the biggest. Eisenhower. Marshall. Montgomery. Against the establishment—and its ideas of warfare.[11]

Evidently the sales pitch, designed to capture both halves of the audience, worked: *Patton* became the third-leading money-earner of 1970.

In effect, both the Left and Right cycles reaffirmed the traditional reconciliatory pattern by reinvoking Classic Hollywood's

most abiding myth: the reluctant hero story. The Right's films made the continuity obvious: solo cops solved society's problems. The Left, however, provided more imaginative reinventions. *Cool Hand Luke* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* kept the disguise thin, both employing a nearly identically camouflaged version of the stock western plot. Both heroes, Luke and McMurphy, were radical individualists (existentially modernized outlaw figures) brought into a demoralized community (prison, asylum) beset by villains who used rules to oppress its members. Both were at first reluctant to get involved: Luke kept to himself on his cot; McMurphy insisted on thinking he would soon be out. Like the standard western figure, both were initially defeated: Luke beaten by Dragline, McMurphy by guards. Both allied themselves with characters who resemble Huck's Jim or *Casablanca*'s Sam. Neither character was black, but *Cool Hand Luke*'s Dragline spoke with obviously black inflection, and *Cuckoo's Nest*'s Chief was the next best thing: an Indian.[12] Both films contained an early showdown that parodied a gunfight, but lifted the spirits of the community and converted it to the hero's side: *Cool Hand Luke*'s elaborate egg-eating contest, *Cuckoo's Nest*'s imaginary World Series game. After more showdowns, and attempts to escape, both heroes were ultimately killed, but their examples revitalized their communities, which continued to circulate rumors of their being alive. *Cuckoo's Nest* even borrowed a symbol from *Shane*. McMurphy's early, failed attempt to lift single-handedly a water fountain was ultimately completed by the Chief, who hurled it through the barred window to make his escape—an image of lifting and metaphorical teamwork that *Shane* had developed in the motif of Starrett and Shane working together to uproot an enormous stump.

Other Left movies seemed to add the reluctant hero pattern as an afterthought. Thus the utterly selfish *Wild Bunch* became unwitting revolutionaries when their deaths provided Mexican farmers with weapons to wage war against their corrupt government. While *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* clearly implied the town of Presbyterian Church's debt to McCabe's enterprise, it did not at first suggest that his death would preserve the community from the "Corporation" that sought to buy it. But the film's final

sequence, a sustained parallel montage between McCabe's duel with the "Corporation's" agents and the townspeople's saving their church from fire, suggested a new communal spirit inspired by the individual hero.

Bonnie and Clyde kept the pattern more subtle, barely alluding to it in the narrative's margins. The movie sought to redeem its heroes by implying that they provided psychological inspiration to dispirited Depression victims. Thus, Clyde discovered his role ("We rob banks") after meeting a man who had lost his farm to a bank; in subsequent robberies, he carefully avoided taking money from private citizens, who later proudly posed beside bullet holes, apparently cheered by the excitement. Penn admitted his intention:

> Socially, the people were paralysed by the Depression; for example, the scene in the camp near the end is nearly stylized in its immobility. I was trying to say that everybody else was still frozen by the atmosphere, by the Depression. At least Bonnie and Clyde were mobile and functioning—sometimes on behalf of foolish things, sometimes self-destructively—but at least they functioned.[13]

Far from being polarized opposites, therefore, the heroes of the Left and Right both reincarnated the same mythic hero—the westerner. Underlying both cycles of films lay a deep-rooted distrust of institutions that translated into a preference for individual solutions. Although the new, complex problems increasingly called for elaborate, permanent, cooperative reform, Hollywood (and thus by implication Americans), as Robert Warshow pointed out, had "always been uneasy with a situation that cannot be solved by personal virtue."[14] Hence both Left and Right films clung to the individual hero as the means by which the spoilers of the American Dream would be outfought. Like the traditional westerner, these heroes relied only on their own intuition: McCabe's boast, "I got the poetry in me," matched Patton's sixth sense, "I feel I am destined to achieve some great thing." Neither the Left nor Right movies ever questioned this private sense of right and wrong: the poetic martyrdoms of the Left and the victories of the Right justified their hunches. Often, too, these films drastically simplified the situations confronting their heroes so

that more subtle, institutional responses seemed unnecessary. *Dirty Harry* suggested the sufficiency of Harry's own explicit version of the stock western phrase, "I don't know what the law says, but I do know what's right and wrong": "When I see an adult male chasing a female down an alley with nothing but a butcher knife and a hard-on, I don't figure he's out collecting for the Red Cross. I shoot the bastard. That's my policy." The Left hero's judgment was portrayed as equally infallible. "They're gonna make it," Wyatt solemnly announced about the struggling farm commune built in the dry sand hills. "Dig, man. They're gonna make it." And the viewer was left to assume he was right.

MYTHIC SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

As opposed to the Right cycle, which told its stories relatively straightforwardly in transparent modes, Left movies displayed a marked self-consciousness about myths and conventions. At one level of self-consciousness, these films merely manipulated or reversed standard genre expectations. Thus, for example, *The Wild Bunch*'s opening shots (children watching fascinated as ants killed a scorpion) undercut the essential premise of the western—the innocence of "natural man." *Little Big Man* furthered the attack on the traditional western by making the Indians the heroes, and Wyatt's and Billy's deaths in *Easy Rider* denied the optimistic conventions of the road movie.

More significantly, the Left films borrowed an obviously self-conscious device from the New Wave (particularly from *Breathless*) in offering heroes who derived their behavior, and ultimately their sense of self, from the ready-made myths that surrounded them. Joe Buck in *Midnight Cowboy* had his Paul Newman *Hud* poster and was impressed by a radio program on which a woman revealed that Gary Cooper was the ideal man. On the first night camping out, *Easy Rider*'s Billy eagerly affirmed his participation in the western tradition: "Out here in the wilderness," he bragged to Wyatt, "fighting Indians and cowboys on every side." McCabe, as David Denby observed, was a faker, "a man who adopts the manner of some famous or legendary character of the Old West, but who actually has the imagi-

nation and humor of a second-rate traveling salesman."[15] Most of the movie's first part, in fact, treated McCabe's reputation as if it were genuine: had he actually killed the gunman Bill Roundtree? (the viewer never found out, but it seemed unlikely), and, as one character asked, "Why the hell would they call him Pudgy McCabe?" (the film gave no answer to that one, either). Butch and Sundance, like Bonnie and Clyde, obsessively photographed themselves, a motif also used in *Cool Hand Luke*, where a picture Luke had made of himself with two women (during his short-lived freedom) became a fetish object for the inmates left behind, a source of inspiration and wonder. Kesey's novel explicitly identified *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*'s McMurphy with pop iconography, particularly in describing the hero's final assault on Big Nurse:

> It was us that had been making him go on for weeks, keeping him standing long after his feet and legs had given out, weeks of making him wink and grin and laugh and go on with his act long after his humor had been parched dry between two electrodes.
>
> We made him stand and hitch up his black shorts like they were horsehide chaps, and push back his cap with one finger like it was a ten-gallon Stetson, slow, mechanical gestures—and when he walked across the floor you could hear the iron in his bare heels ring sparks out of the tile.[16]

With its naturalistic style, the movie largely ignored these references, but it did suggest that McMurphy had feigned madness to escape the work details of normal prison life, and thus, that he was acting out his own conception of what a mad person would be like. When the head doctor expressed doubt as to his insanity, McMurphy asked willingly, "What do you want me to do, Doc, take a shit on the floor?"

Godard used his heroes' self-conscious myth-making as a Brechtian device that revealed the received elements in all behavior. A viewer could observe the growing discrepancy between reality and the role or myth assumed, and, as a result, gradually withdraw his identification with the hero. *2 or 3 Things I Know about Her*, for example, clearly suggested the illusoriness of the bourgeois dreams of fine clothes and an apartment that had prompted a married woman to take up part-time prostitu-